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ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
МОСКВА

835
Mukhtar Auezov

A Novel

Book One

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
MOSCOW

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN

BY L. NAVROZOV

EDITED BY H. PERHAM

ILLUSTRATED BY L. ILYINA

DESIGNED BY S. POZHARSKY

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The Author About Himself

WAS born in the family of Omarkhan Aue-zov, a Kazakh nomad, on September 28, 1897. My forebears came from Central Asia and since the beginning of the 19th century belonged to the tribe of the Tobikty, the tribe of my hero Abai Kunanbayev.

My early childhood was spent in an aul where I learned my letters. We children were then taught by our grandfather Auez (from whom my second name stems).

I remember that I was five or six years old when, one evening as we sat anticipating a pleasant supper, our grandfather decided to see for himself if I had grown enough to be taught my letters: he made me repeat several words containing the sound "r". The alphabet was out of question for those who could not pronounce this letter distinctly: the mullahs indeed twisted the tongues of those who could not, for the very first lessons consisted in learning the opening verses of the Koran: "Bismillyali rakhman ir-rakhim..." ("In the name of God Almighty"). And no mullah could tolerate the distortion of the sacred text. Seemingly satisfied with me, my grandfather gave me my first lesson on the very next day.

It was a clear warm spring morning and the lambs, kids and calves so dear to a child's heart frolicked on the meadow between the winter stays, while a long procession of swans shining in the sun floated over us like the white-winged fairies of Grandmother's tales, and a scarcely audible song came to us from on high. Suddenly, the spell of spring was broken as we were summoned to Grandfather's low stuffy winter house. I was even more crushed when I saw a thick volume in his hands and realized what was in store for us. Grandfather showed the Arabic letters, each of which had such a difficult name.

The book was a collection of Abai's poems. Auez, the poet's friend and sincere admirer, had ordered the book copied by a mullah. He decided to teach us to read with the book of his favourite poet, hoping that we too would be inspired.

Our grandfather had his own methods of teaching, methods which perhaps made things easier for the tutor, but wrung many a tear from the poor pupil. I could hardly tell one letter from another when I was compelled to learn verse after verse. Emulating the mullahs, Grandfather kept us poring over the book from morning till night and then made us recite it all again to him and our father before supper. The spring sun was tarnished for me and I was not able to see my lambs for many a day. Abai's pages filled with the complaints of Tatyana were wetted with the tears of quite another victim, but Auez would not relent even though kind-hearted Grandmother tried to intercede, afraid that her grandchild would be stupefied by incessant memorizing.

My father died when I was eleven and I was adopted by my uncle Kasimbek who left the Moslem madrasah for the Russian school as a young man in spite of the anathemas pronounced by his tutor. My uncle sent me to the Semipalatinsk five-grade school, where I received the zemstvo stipend for Chinghis Volost.

The tsarist government collected the money for these stipends among the steppe population in order to train interpreters, minor officials and such. The Kazakhs, however, sent their children to the Russian schools most unwillingly. Their patriarchal prejudices and the fanatical sermons of the mullahs sowed distrust for the Russian school: many thought that the school had been established for the sole purpose of baptizing Kazakh children. The uyezds chiefs, therefore, had to fill the vacancies by compulsion—demanding two boys per volost. The volost chiefs, indeed, often bribed the parents to supply the boys. Our grandfather, naturally, had to endure censure and ridicule from the elders and aksakals for permitting his sons and grandsons to study at the Russian school. When we pupils returned to our auls during the summer vacations, the big men of the tribe shook their heads ruefully when they saw our uniforms and charged this calamity to the influence of Abai. I dare say they were right. The great poet not only championed Russian education in his poetry and philosophical treatises, but sent his children to a Russian school, a fact that was well known.

The steppe life in which we shared during our holidays contrasted sharply with our life in the town and therefore stressed the remnants of nomadic feudalism, the ignominious customs of the old patriarchal days—the custom of the kalim, bigamy, of exacting fines for murder, inter-tribal strife with its raids, robberies and litigations which were such a heavy burden on the people. That sombre life of the backward steppes was so tenacious that even after the establishment of Soviet power in Kazakhstan, the public had to fight the bais and semi-feudals who clung to the ancient law, to the Adat and Sharia.

I graduated from the Semipalatinsk Teachers Seminary in 1919 and after the advent of Soviet power worked first in the Semipalatinsk Regional Executive Committee and later in the Central Committee of Kazakhstan lo-

cated in Orenburg. At the same time, I tried my pen as a playwright and journalist. In the autumn of 1922, I attended the lectures at the Central Asian State University in Tashkent and began contributing to the magazine *Sholpan*, writing a few stories for them.

A year later, I entered the Philological Department of the Leningrad State University and continued my studies there until 1928, after which I took a post-graduate course at the Oriental Department at the Central Asian State University in Tashkent.

By that time, my plays were running in various Kazakh theatres. I had also published several short stories and narratives in various magazines. As time went on, I accumulated a substantial stock of experience and impressions which furthered my maturity.

I have written more than twenty plays showing various stages of socialism in Kazakhstan; in addition, I have turned out many short stories and novels. During the last ten years, I have been working on a novel about Abai, the classical Kazakh writer.

Before setting to work on this novel, I made a study of his life and works. I was the editor of his complete works, wrote his biography, collected the historical material pertaining to this poet and his epoch. I also wrote a tragedy called *Abai*, describing the last years of the poet's life, in collaboration with my friend, the Russian writer Leonid Sobolev, an ardent student of Kazakh culture.

The process of collecting the material on Abai had its own peculiarities unknown to most authors of historical novels. It so happens that there is no written or printed data on the life, work, appearance and character of Abai—neither his personal archives nor his diaries, letters or memories or any accounts. I had to glean the facts from my talks with people who once knew him. Most of them—very old men who found it difficult to remember the days of old, the people they had known, the talks

they had had with them and the events they witnessed. I also had a talk with Kokpai, the only one of the poet's intimate friends who was my contemporary and died in 1927. To my regret, he could not tell me anything about Abai's youth, being sixteen years younger than the poet.

Long before I conceived the novel, however, I heard the accounts of my grandfather Auez who was a few years older than Abai. He remembered Kunanbai too. It was then too that I saw Dilda, Abai's first wife. Many valuable impressions also came to me from Aigerim who survived her husband by ten years and cherished his memory.

I spoke to Abai's friends and admirers and also to his enemies and ill-wishers—to their contemporaries or sons and grandsons. As a result of my search, I accumulated such a mass of data that I often repeated one of Gorky's great behests: "You must write about the things you have no right to conceal." Now that the novel about Abai's youth is finished, I see that I have still so much unused material that I could write another book about the same period. This plenitude of material furnished a favourable and even decisive condition for my work.

The work of collecting had its difficulties of course. I had to read the past by means of the feeble old memories of my contemporaries. I had to let my imagination roam and decipher many things by collating them with the story of another contemporary. Those memories required cautious handling. It is thus that the belated traveller finds an ember in the ashes left by the caravan before him and kindles it to life ever so cautiously with his own breath. It was as difficult to reconstruct the past as to discern the beauty of the young Aigerim in her sixty-year-old version.

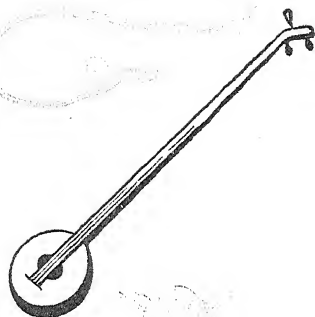
While re-creating the poet's image, I was mindful not only of his place in our history and his progressive role in the past, but of his dreams which linked him with our generation.

The novel *Abai* is part of a series which will describe the life of the Kazakh people from the middle of the last century to our day. *Abai* is the first novel of this series.

From my student years I have combined my writing with research. I take part in the work of compiling textbooks on the history of Kazakh literature for the schools and universities, and I have also been lecturing at the University of Alma-Ata for more than fifteen years. As a professor of the Kazakh Kirov State University, I conduct a special course on the works of Abai and talk on Kazakh folklore. As a member of the Kazakh Academy of Sciences, I work in the Research Institute of Language and Literature under the auspices of the Kazakh Academy of Sciences.

MUKHTAR AUEZOV

At B. A. I.

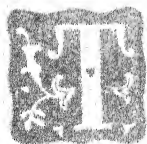






The Home-Coming

I



HE BOY was anxious to get home. He was willing to go to any lengths to make this, the third day of the journey, the last! Long before dawn in Korik, where they had spent the night, he had wakened Baitas, his kinsman, who had come to fetch him from the town, and urged that the three of them travel on at the first sign of day. The boy continually spurred his horse on, in order to keep an arrow's flight ahead of his companions.

"How anxious he is to get back to the aul!"* Baitas and old Zhumabai exclaimed again and again.

"Poor boy! He must have been dying of boredom in that madrasah** all winter!"

And the two men urged their horses on, trying to catch up with the boy. Zhumabai carried an old weapon under his knee, the black shokpar,*** while Baitas kept in place a long birch-wood soeel**** by the tip of his boot.

* Aul—a local village.

** Madrasah—a Moslem religious school.

*** Shokpar—a club used as weapon.

**** Soeel—a long pole with a loop at one end to capture horses. Can also serve as a weapon.

As they approached the Takirbulak groves, Baitas thought it better to check the boy's fervour.

"Don't ride on alone," he called. "There may be robbers in Esembai Gully!"

"And they may be watching you this very minute," added Zhumabai. "They are probably saying, 'Oh, he's brave, is he? Rides alone, does he?' And they'll hit you over the head."

"And you? What are you here for?"

"Hah! What could we do? There are only two of us."

"And they're a band," agreed Zhumabai. "If they mistake us for kinsmen, we'll get by, but if they don't—things will be bad!" He scowled at the youngster, trying to frighten him.

But the effect was quite different.

"If there's nothing you can do anyway, what does it matter whether I'm with you or not? I'm off!"

He dashed ahead, lashing his horse, never once looking back until he came to Esembai Gully.

During the first two days of the journey his elders had exasperated him with their dawdling and now, on this last day, he was happy to have found a means of hurrying them up; he would keep well ahead of them all the way to the aul, he decided.

Although his companions were nearly out of sight, he galloped on. It was broken country, all hills and mounds, a region deserted now that the auls had shifted to the Chinghis Mountains. Every hill commanded an excellent view of the road, and those eager to enrich themselves at the expense of others would find the ravines and gullies very convenient hiding places for a surprise attack.

"Why isn't he afraid? Hasn't he any sense?" Baitas shook his head reprovingly.

Zhumabai, who had also been unable to keep the boy in check, readily agreed:

"He's just like his father! A true son of the old wolf, that's clear! There's nothing for it but to keep pace with him."

They galloped on, now one, now the other racing ahead. Baitas was riding the swift black-maned steed of Kunanbai himself, and Zhumabai was on another of his master's horses, the big snow-white stallion Naiman-Kok. They flew through a pass and were approaching another. Emerging on to a ridge, they found that the boy was nowhere in sight. As they began to descend into the hollow, Zhumabai suddenly heard the clatter of hoofs—from the direction of Esembai Pass, or worse still, from the gully itself!

Zhumabai was beside himself with terror. "The devils are loose! They've killed the boy," he thought, "and now they're after us." Lashing his horse wildly, he raced on, afraid to look back. Then suddenly a rasping voice barked the command:

"Close your eyes!"

Zhumabai turned, but the face of his pursuer was covered with a kerchief in the manner usual to the local robbers on a daylight raid. Baitas was far ahead, goading his animal to top speed. So Zhumabai was alone. . . . "I'll fight him off," he decided and gripped the shokpar under his knee. "But what if he hits me over the head with a shokpar first?" came the horrible thought. Zhumabai flattened himself against the neck of his horse to evade the blow.

The stranger gave his victim no time to reach again for the weapon. Dashing up, he jerked the old man's wide-brimmed black hat down over his eyes. Zhumabai was afraid to raise his head—he could not pluck up courage to grapple with his antagonist and it was too late to attempt an escape. The bandit tore the shokpar from under his knee. Suddenly Naiman-Kok pulled up sharp, as though he had come up against a barrier. Zhumabai sat up cautiously and pushed his hat back with trembling hands.

Could he be dreaming? There, on the horse before him, sat the boy! So that was the attacker who had disarmed him, stopped his horse and now sat there choking with laughter. There could be no mistake: it was Abai, the "wolf-cub of Kunanbai."

Furious and ashamed, Zhumabai said testily:

"You're asking for trouble with your pranks, my son! And what a place you've picked for them! The very nest of the robbers."

The boy's dark face was ruddy with suppressed laughter. He bent his head and began to put his cap on properly. Like a real bandit, he had turned his cap and cape inside out. It had been easy to overtake Zhumabai and order him to halt in a disguised voice.

Baitas now reappeared, and it was hard to say whether he had been frightened or not. When he saw what had happened he laughed and seemed to enjoy the joke.

"Just look, he's even covered up the bald spot on his bay!"

Zhumabai looked, and sure enough the mark over the eyes of the boy's horse was smeared over with clay. But the old man was accustomed to commanding respect; he could not afford to become the butt of a joke and tried to laugh the matter off.

"What a little devil—he's just like his father!" he said with a forced smile. "No wonder the Kerei and the Uak are constantly complaining that the Tobikty* are all thieves and bandits. And well they may, if even this imp knows all the tricks of highway robbery!"

* Tobikty—a large tribe of Kazakhs in Central Zhusha (Central Orda) which inhabited the southern section of what is now Semipalatinsk Region, the entire territory of the Chinghis Range and the steppes to the north. Their neighbours were the Kerei tribe to the south, the Uak to the north, the Siban to the east and Karakesek to the west. The Tobikty were composed of a number of clans of which the Irgizbai, the Zhigitek, the Bokenshi, the Torgai, the Topai, the Karabatir and the Kokshe are mentioned in this narrative. Abai belonged to the Irgizbai.—Ed.

Abai was well aware of his father's esteem for this old man. He did not know exactly why Zhumabai had come to the town, but from snatches of conversation between his two companions he had gathered that the old man had been entrusted with an important mission by Kunanbai himself. He stopped laughing and brought his horse closer to Zhumabai.

"The journey is long and I only wanted to pass the time. Please forgive me, Zhumakeh," he said affectionately and, though he made no reply, the old man was secretly pleased. Baitas, on the other hand, began to joke with Abai as though he were quite grown-up:

"First you play a prank, and then you say, 'Forgive me, please!' It reminds me of my song:

*Loading my camel for the journey
I knew the burden would not be too great;
But how will Oikapa endure the weight
Of time while I am on the journey?*

Abai wondered what he meant.

"Who is Oikapa, Baitas-aga?"

"Don't you remember Oikeh, my wife?"

"Of course I do. What about her?"

"Last year I was away the whole summer, staying at all the auls and having a gay time with the girls. But when it was all over I just couldn't muster enough courage to face my wife. So I decided to soften her heart with this little song of remorse. I passed it on to my friends the singers and she heard it from them a full month before my return."

Handsome Baitas was known for his songs, and Abai regarded him with frank admiration. He remembered Oikeh and Baitas's friends whom he had met the summer before. They were all cheerful and tireless singers with pleasant voices. But what was the end of the story? Bai-

tas had talked with him as with a grown-up, and so he ventured to ask:

"But what did Oikeh say, Baitas-aga?"

Baitas smiled, but suddenly grew serious.

"What could she say? Could the heart of a poor woman resist a song sent to her from afar, a song pleading for forgiveness? When I rode up to the house, she came out to meet me, put away my horse, and then my song floated off to be heard in all the auls. And that was all." Baitas winked at Zhumabai.

Naiman-Kok had settled down to an even trot and was slightly in advance. The boy suddenly realized where they were and homesickness again swept everything from his mind. Lashing his horse, he dashed off, though his companions pleaded:

"Now then, son, you'll ride your horse to death!"

"If you go on alone, you may really fall into the hands of the bandits!"

But released from the town and the stupefying madrasah, Abai was so homesick that he scarcely heard what they were saying. And why should he be so afraid of Esembai Gully and the bandits who struck such terror in the hearts of his companions? What, after all, was the difference between them and the other Kazakhs? Only that they wore ragged clothes, had battered saddles and carried soeels.... Abai had seen their kind before. He had heard the stories of the old men, and would not have minded seeing a bandit raid himself.

Sentry Hill, Secret Gully, and all these places were as familiar to him as his native village. Kunanbai's aul camped here for several months every spring and autumn. The ravines, the gorges, the hollows, the places where the foals were kept and the tents put up, the hilly pastures which could be seen from the road, were all well known and dear to the boy. It was from this very spot, from Esembai, that he had been sent to the mad-

rasah last year. That was after the Bokhrau* holidays had begun and the sheep were being shorn. It seemed only yesterday that he had been running about these hills with the other boys, racing them on the yearlings and playing at knucklebones. In the town he had often dreamed of the wonderful days spent here in Esembai.

Now he was told that it was infested with robbers, a place of danger and disaster, but he was not impressed. These were the same yellowish hills and green fields, the same expanses of silvery feather-grass reaching as far as one could see. Abai looked about him with a loving eye—at the limitless steppes, the hills where he had been born and had spent his childhood. He would have liked to embrace it all, to press it to his heart. How caressing was the cool breeze, a gentle breath, never violent and never still. It set the great steppes rippling, wave upon wave of silvery feather-grass. Perhaps these were not steppes at all, but a great sea, a fantastic ocean. . . . He could not look his fill. He was overwhelmed by the gigantic expanses, and not in the least afraid of them! If he could have put his arms around them, he would have whispered, "How I longed for you! To others you may be terrifying, but not to me, my dearest, my own steppes!"

And the boy flew on, a speck against the silver green.

"Are we to crawl after him like wagon drivers in a caravan?" shouted Baitas angrily. "Let's get on, Zhumakeh, we're being put to shame!" Spurring his roan, he galloped away.

Whether he liked it or not, Zhumabai had to follow, and soon all three were racing through the steppes.

The boy had had his way. Not resting once from the moment they left Korik, they rode hard all day on froth-spattered horses until just before the evening prayers at sundown they approached Kunanbai's aul in Kolgainar, where Abai's mother Ulzhan lived.

* Bokhrau is the Kazakh for the Russian Church feast of Protection of the Holy Mary.—*Ed.*

The stream that flowed through Kolgainar was renowned for its clear, ever-plentiful waters. And there were trees. Not a forest perhaps, but enough to shelter the three or four auls of Kunanbai on their way to zhailyau* in the Chinghis Mountains. Near Kunanbai's yurtas stood those of his nearest kinsmen.

The evening air of the steppes reverberated with sounds. The barking of the dogs mingled with the cries of the shepherds, the bleating of the sheep and the clatter of hoofs. A golden veil of dust rose over the aul as the horses pressed towards the spring. Let loose, the colts whinnied as they pounded about in search of their mares. Smoke from the camp-fires hung over the village in a solid dark-grey cloud. Here were the things for which Abai had longed so much, things which set his heart racing like a restive colt.

The three riders approached the aul on the banks of the stream. The five tents in the foreground were the dwell-

* According to the customs of the nomadic Kazakhs, an aul constituted a group of wigwam-like tents, yurtas, whose inhabitants were related, and linked economically. Each aul had its permanent camping sites for the various seasons: the kokteu for the spring, the zhailyau for the summer, the kuseu for the autumn, and the kstau for the winter, during which the members of the aul dwelt in houses of timber and clay. The various camping sites and surrounding land were held by the respective auls by agreement reached among the tribal elders, but were often the cause of discord and enmity between different auls and entire clans.

The master of the aul was its richest member, the head of the family, the bai or elder after whom the village was named. His Great Yurta stood at the edge of the aul, while those which ranged about it in a semicircle were known as the otau (the Young Yurtas) tenanted by his married sons. Beyond these stood the tents of the nearest kinsmen. Then came the special Guest Yurtas for chance visitors, and finally the tents of "neighbours" employed in the aul. On their side of the village lay the so-called kotan, a large enclosure for the sheep and the enclosures where the foals were tethered. Here too were the tents for the preparation of cheese and other produce.

The sons and nearest kin of the aul master wandered with

ings of the two younger wives of Kunanbai—Ulzhan and Aigiz—and their big families. Kunanbai's eldest wife, Kunkeh, lived in another aul.

The newcomers were recognized at once as they picked their way through a flock of sheep straggling towards the evening pastures. The first to see them were milkmaids in big aprons, the hems of their skirts tucked up in their belts.

"They're back from town! They're back!"

"And there's Abai! Little Abai!"

"Yes, that's Telkara!* I must tell his mother!" And dropping her pails, one of the young women hurried away to the Great Yurta.

Ulzhan, who had been counting the days and the hours since Baitas had set off to fetch Abai, was weary of waiting. Having calculated the time needed to reach the town and to return, she had been expecting the travellers on that very day. The cries of the women reached her instantly.

Ulzhan's plump, pallid face, still almost without a wrinkle, though over forty, was wreathed in smiles as

him from camp to camp until their flocks and herds outgrew the predetermined number and it was difficult to manage the animals at the watering places and on the pastures (it was not customary to keep more than 1,000 sheep in one flock). When this occurred, the various members of the family would separate from the Great Aul, with their cattle, tents and "neighbours," and established a new and independent aul, leading its own nomadic life, though always in the vicinity of the parent village.

The chares of the aul were done by the "neighbours," the poor relatives or labourers who were paid for their work in kind: in milk, cheese, wool, or meat. They were the herdsmen, the shepherds, the milkers, the cooks, the water-carriers, etc. The poorest of the "neighbours," zhataks, never wandered from the winter places with the others, but stayed on to guard the permanent buildings of their auls.—*Author's note.*

* Telkara—a name indicating that Abai had been raised by his mother and grandmother. Tel—fed by two mothers, kara—dark, olive-skinned.—*Ed.*

she came out of the tent, walking gracefully despite her heavy body and solicitously leading Zereh, her aged mother-in-law, by the hand. Old Zereh had been longing for her favourite grandchild all winter. Not forgetting him for a moment, she had offered up numberless prayers for his safety.

A large crowd gathered to meet the three riders between the Great Yurta and the Guest Yurta. Girls and women from neighbouring yurtas, a number of old men and women flocked to the spot. Little boys came running as fast as their legs would carry them, and men, too, approached from all sides.

Abai stood eagerly scanning the crowd; he had quite forgotten that he had outpaced his companions. He dismounted and someone led away his horse. Then he saw his mother and would have flung himself into her arms, but Ulzhan restrained him with a gesture:

"Ah, my son! Don't you see your father? First make your salem* to him!"

Turning quickly, Abai saw his father Kunanbai among several old men who stood somewhat apart, behind the Guest Yurta. Embarrassed by his oversight, the boy made for the group. Baitas and Zhumabai too were hurrying towards Kunanbai, leading their horses by the rein. Kunanbai stood before them—tall, broad, grey-bearded. His single eye, glittering strangely in his pale, stony face, seemed unaware of them. Other riders were approaching him, stout men, handsomely attired and well mounted. These were the elders, and from the attentive way Kunanbai was watching them it was obvious that he had been expecting them.

Before Baitas and Zhumabai could approach, Abai was at his father's side. Kunanbai returned the boy's greet-

* Salem—a greeting, and also an oral message delivered through a third party.—Ed.

ings with a nod, but did not change his position. Merely casting an appraising glance at Abai, he remarked:

"You've grown. Has your knowledge grown as well?"

Was this said in jest, or did it express doubt? Did his father really want to know anything about him? From his earliest years the boy had been accustomed to watching the movement of his father's brows for a warning, just as a shepherd watches the clouds in the year of the djut.* And it was for this that his father prized him above the other children. Abai could see that Kunanbai had no thoughts for him at the moment and was concerned only with the approaching party. But the boy knew, too, that his father would be displeased if his question were left unanswered and so quietly and with dignity he declared:

"Praise be to God, Father." And then he added, "School is not over, but you sent for me. The khazret** gave his blessing and I have come home."

Next to his father stood Maibasars and his servant. The younger brother of Kunanbai, Maibasars, was the son of one of the four younger wives of Kunanbai's father. When Kunanbai had been elected Aga-Sultan*** earlier in the year, he had placed his brother at the head of the Tobikty Volost.

"He is quite grown up now..." Maibasars ventured, pleased with Abai's answer.

* Djut—a natural calamity when the cattle, unable to reach their fodder under the ice and snow during a hard winter, perish of hunger.—*Ed.*

** Khazret—the holy one, a respectful name applied to priests.—*Ed.*

*** Aga-Sultan (Senior Sultan)—chief of the regional department. He was elected from among the elders of the Kazakh clans at a general meeting of the region and his candidacy was approved by the governor-general of Western Siberia. The Vice-Sultan and a Russian official or officer assisted him in his work of regulating the affairs of the Kazakhs in the region. Kunanbai was the Aga-Sultan of Karkaralinsk Region from 1857 to 1858.—*Ed.*

But he was interrupted by Kunanbai, who briefly commanded, "Go, my son, and greet your mothers!"

Abai had been waiting for this, and as he turned to the women who had been murmuring among themselves as they watched him jealously, his face again took on a happy, boyish expression. With his usual impetuosity he rushed towards his mother, but someone caught him on the way and he was showered with kisses by the old men and women. So they still considered him a child? He flushed, but was not sure whether to be angry or not. There were tears in the eyes of the old women.

Breaking away at last, Abai hurried to his own mother, Ulzhan, who stood at the side of the beautiful Aigiz, Kunanbai's third wife.

"They have smeared their kisses all over our boy's face and there's not a dry spot left for us!" said Aigiz. With a disdainful smile, she imprinted a kiss on his brow.

His own mother did not kiss him—she merely pressed him to her bosom and inhaled the warm fragrance of his hair—the reserve and coolness of his father having long since affected her. Aware of this, the boy had expected no more. But he could feel such warmth and love in her silent embrace that his heart contracted strangely.

Ulzhan did not keep him long.

"You must greet your grandmother," she said and turned him towards the entrance of the Great Yurta.

Old Zereh was leaning on her stick and grumbling.

"Ah, the rascal. He didn't come to me first, he had to run to his father!" But no sooner was he in her arms than her rebukes changed to the tenderest of words.

"My sunshine, my little lamb, my dear heart!" she said again and again, big tears rolling from her eyes.

Abai entered the tent arm in arm with the old woman. He sat there a long time, until it was quite dark. His mother offered him mare's milk, cold meat and tea, but he had

no stomach for food, though he had eaten nothing since dawn.

The women and girls plied him with endless questions.

"Have you finished your schooling?"

"Are you a fully-fledged mullah* now?"

"Whom did you miss most of all?"

Abai answered in monosyllables, but the last question aroused him.

"Where is Ospan? Where has he gone to?" he asked with such urgency that they knew right away that most of all he had missed his younger brother, that piece of mischief known as Ospan.

"Who knows? He's running about somewhere, the little scamp. We were so angry with him today that Grandmother and I turned him out." Ulzhan nodded toward Zereh who, realizing that she was being spoken of, demanded:

"Eh, what's that? What's that you're saying? I can't hear a word."

Abai shouted in her ear, explaining what had been said.

"Granny, you were not like this last year. What's the matter with your ears?"

He embraced Zereh and nestled against her knees. She had understood his words.

"What's there left of your granny, dear heart? Only a bag of bones," she quavered.

Abai's heart ached for the old woman, destined to live in a world of her own although there were many around her.

"But perhaps your ears could be cured, if one really tried?"

Old Zereh laughed with the others, but to avoid hurting him she said with a smile:

"If the mullah would blow a prayer into them, I might hear better. They say it helps."

* Mullah—a Moslem priest.—*Ed.*

"That's good," laughed Aigiz, "your grandson is already a mullah; let him blow if it helps!"

But the other women were serious, as though they really believed in the efficacy of Abai's learning.

"Let him blow into her ears! It will ease her heart at least."

Abai knew very well that this method of curing, as well as the custom of painting a sore spot with colours washed from the holly letters, and the prayers and the chants and all the other devices of the mullahs were nothing but empty make-believe. For a time he sat smiling at his predicament, but suddenly he took the old woman's head between his hands, pressed his lips to her ear, and half murmured, half whispered:

*Beauteous of form, her eyes like gems aglow
Would even shame the burning sky of dawn!
Her gentle throat is whiter than the snow
And only Allah could have traced that brow.*

No one in the tent could catch the words, but the women were convinced that he was praying. His legs folded under him, the boy kept a straight face and like a seasoned mullah carried on:

*And yet in those brief moments when we met
My eyes grew dim and inwardly I bled,
And all the words upon my tongue lay dead
Before the vision of that radiant loveliness!*

He half closed his eyes, pursed his lips and blew into his grandmother's ear:

"Su-uff!"

Those were his own verses. He had made them up in the spring when his head was filled with the verses of Navoi and Fizuli. The women, however, believed that Abai was saying a prayer. To prolong the illusion, the boy

spoke in whispers and only at the end did he give the joke away by raising his voice. Ecstatically rocking to and fro like a mullah when chanting from the Koran, he completed the verses in the ritual sing-song:

*But tarry a while, why hurry away
Like a bird on the wing to the south on its way?
And Granny can't hear a word that I say—
But still she is waiting for me to pray!*

"Su-uff!" he blew into her ear again, but everyone realized the joke and there was general laughter. The old woman too understood and laughed silently. Pleased and happy, she pressed her cheek to his forehead and patted his back.

Abai maintained his earnest expression, though a glint of merriment lurked in his eyes. Hugging the old woman, he asked:

"Can you hear a little better now?"

"Oh yes, much better. May you live in never-ending joy, my little one!"

The boy's jest had evoked laughter, but something of admiration too.

Ulzhan, his mother, did not burst out laughing like the others; she regarded him thoughtfully. How he had grown in that year! How manly he had become, what intelligence shone out of his eyes! He was not at all like his brothers. A faint smile touched her lips.

"I thought they had made a mullah of you in the town, my son," she said, "but it seems you have taken after my kin!"

The hint was not lost on the others and there was more laughter.

"Why, of course, there's Shanshar* blood in his veins!"

* Shanshar--the name of a Kazakh clan.—Ed.

"One can see at once that he's the grandson of Tonteken!"

Someone recalled Tonteken's words on his death-bed: "It's a shame to cheat the hadjis and mullahs of their expectations. I'd really better die, let them at least earn something from the funeral."

"Apa,"* said Abai thoughtfully, "isn't it better to die like Tonteken than be a quack and live on charity?"

"It is well that you think so. How you have grown, my boy," his mother sighed.

The figure of Maibasars attendant, the bearded Kamisbai, appeared at the entrance of the tent.

"Your father calls, son!"

There was an instant hush, and the mood which had possessed Abai all evening was gone. He left the tent without a word.

The Guest Yurta was not at all like his mother's tent. Even its exterior seemed austere and forbidding. Stepping inside, Abai clearly and distinctly pronounced his salem. The grown-ups replied. There were not many: Kunanbai, Maibasars, Zhumabai and several elders of the Tobikty tribe—Baisals, Bozhei, Karatai and Suyundik. Of the young men there was only Zhirenshe, Baisals cousin, who was always in his company and was also Abais friend, though older than he.

From earliest childhood Abai had known that when his father took counsel with such people as these, especially with three or four of the most influential elders, there was something extraordinary afoot. He had never attended such a counsel; this was the first time he had been invited by his father, and there must be some good reason for it.

No sooner had Abai seated himself than the old men put various questions to him about the town, his studies and his health. Karatai, a garrulous old man with shrewd

* Apa—mother.—*Ed.*

features, showed an unusual interest in his answers. He mentioned another son of Kunanbai.

"That Takezhan of yours is a brave fellow," he said, "so agile and clever."

"That's true," added Bozhei, "he can do anything."

"Yes, yes, that boy's sharp as a needle," Baisai hastened to put in his word.

The praises were obviously directed at Kunanbai, but the latter sat silent, impervious to the flattery. Suddenly, as though to spite them, he turned to Abai and said:

"If anything may be expected at all, then expect it from that swarthy brat over there!"

Karatai sooner than the others sensed that Kunanbai had not summoned the boy merely to praise him. Turning to Bozhei and Baisai with a smile, he said:

"And do you know what Abai said during the circumcision ritual?"*

Abai was not at all pleased at the idea of Karatai talking about his childhood foibles and he flushed with embarrassment. One was not allowed to interrupt an elder person, however, so he tried to look as though it all had nothing to do with him.

"When it was being done," Karatai laughed, "he began to cry. 'My God, why wasn't I born a girl?' he said. But his mother told him, 'You don't know what you're saying, my child, because then you would have to give birth, which is far worse than being circumcised!' 'Oh!' he said, 'so the girls have their troubles too!' And he stopped crying at once."

The old men laughed.

Kunanbai sat immobile, as though he had heard nothing. His father and Baisai wore an air of preoccupation, indicating that such talk would find no support in that quarter, and Abai was relieved. They surely couldn't

* The Moslems circumcise their boys at the age of five-seven.
—Ed.

have summoned him here like a grown man only to ridicule him as a child?

Just then, Ospan, Abai's younger brother, ran into the tent.

How many times had Abai asked for him today! How he had longed to see the rascal!

Ospan did not forget to make his salem, but paying no further attention to his father and the others, he flung himself on Abai's neck. He was five years younger than Abai, and he loved him more than any of his other brothers.

Conscious that he had to bear himself with dignity in the presence of the grown-ups, Abai embraced his brother somewhat ceremoniously and kissed him on both cheeks, as an elder brother should. Seeing that the boys had just met, the old men took an indulgent view of such licence. But Ospan started to play the fool and soon dispelled the favourable impression. When Abai asked where he had been, the scamp only clung to his neck and whispered into his ear obscene words he had heard from his elder brother Takezhan. Such was Abai's meeting with the brother he had missed so much. He recoiled from Ospan in horror.

"What did you say?" But Ospan flung himself round his neck again.

"Don't tell father! Don't you dare tell!" he whispered fiercely, and suddenly pushed Abai to the ground.

Self-conscious in the presence of the elders, Abai did his best to extricate himself and regain his composure. But stocky little Ospan laid him flat on both shoulders, and taking something from his mouth thrust it, all slippery, down Abai's neck. Abai wriggled his shoulders and tried to get free. Just a minute ago he had been sitting so importantly among the grown-ups and now that little scamp of a brother had gone and disgraced him! Forgetful of his father, Ospan rocked with laughter.

"It's a frog! I've put a frog down his neck!"

This made Abai wriggle all the more.

Kunanbai had at first paid no attention to the boys struggling behind his back, thinking they would soon quieten down. But now he turned sharply and saw that the sturdy Ospan had pinned Abai to the ground and was sitting on his chest.

Exasperated, Kunanbai caught Ospan with one hand and slapped him soundly across his face with the other. The boy reddened, but stood still, his large eyes flashing. He was not intimidated and regarded his parent calmly, as though nothing had happened. Amazed by the youngster's fortitude, Suyundik leaned towards Baisal:

"He's a little wolf," he said.

"A real Kuzh,"* whispered the other.

Kunanbai motioned to his servant:

"Throw the rascal out!" He pushed Ospan towards the door. The boy tripped up and would have fallen had the servant not caught him in time. For a few moments there was silence. Not until people had begun to stir, and someone had coughed did Kunanbai speak again.

2

The earthenware lamp over the low round table in the centre of the tent shed a reddish light, flickering in the draught coming through the lower apertures of the tent. Kunanbai sat beside his son, a grim profile against the light.

There was something oppressively sombre in Kunanbai's bearing and his compelling features. His words, sharp and impressive, fell upon his hearers with ponderous fury. He spoke in parables and proverbs.

The boy could barely follow his father's meaning. What hidden purpose lay behind it? He could only under-

* Kuzh—legendary giant.—*Ed.*

stand a few disconnected expressions. As became an aksakal,* Kunanbai spoke in a roundabout way, circling round his subject like a hawk over his prey. Abai could not make head or tail of it and was utterly confused. If he could, he would have fled to the tent of his mothers, but that was not to be thought of. His father had summoned him, and it was impossible to leave.

He sat there listening. Some of the words were new and altogether incomprehensible, and he tried to fix them in his mind. His father was angry with someone, menacing someone. In his mind's eye, Abai envisaged a body of formidably armed men charging across the steppes to meet the enemy. When the harangue grew meaningless, he stared at Kunanbai's face, his thoughts far away.

From childhood Abai had had a habit of staring intently, unwaveringly, at the faces of story-tellers, bards and all whose speech attracted his attention. For him the faces of men had always had a special appeal. But the most interesting of all were the wrinkled faces of the old men. The folds of their withered cheeks and foreheads, their faded eyes and the waves of their flowing beards conjured up pictures of groves of sparse and straggling saplings or soft grass rippling over the black earth beneath.... At times he would find a curious likeness in them to wild beasts or gentle domestic animals. A whole universe would come alive for him in the movements and outlines of human features.

His father's head was long and shaped like the egg of a goose, and his face seemed all the longer because of his thin wedge of a beard. To Abai it was like a plain on which were two hills overgrown with the thickets of his eyebrows. Kunanbai's single eye stood watchfully on guard by the left hill, a vigilant and tireless watchman. That eye seemed never to hide behind its lid; large and

* Aksakal—old man, the elder of the aul (literally: white-beard).—*Ed.*

slightly protuberant, its glance was sharp and avid, as though devouring everything around. And it hardly ever blinked.

Over Kunanbai's shoulders lay a coat of fluffy young camel-skin. He was speaking weightily, with conviction, and his single eye never strayed from Suyundik, who sat opposite.

Suyundik now and then stole a furtive glance at the speaker, without daring to look him in the eye. His beard was a dull silver grey, and his features seemed quite dull and commonplace to Abai. They told him nothing about the man.

At first glance Bozhei too seemed quite an ordinary sort of a man, though with his dark skin, black beard and prominent nose he was certainly the most handsome among the men present. He had fewer wrinkles too. Bozhei never once stirred or raised his eyes throughout Kunanbai's long speech. It was difficult to say whether he was dozing or sunk in reflection. Those heavy lids of his veiled all that passed in his mind.

Only Baisal, who sat in a prominent place, was looking directly at Kunanbai as he spoke. Baisal was a tall, impressive-looking man with ruddy cheeks. His large blue eyes were coldly expressive of his reticence, his ability to conserve a secret in the very depths of his soul.

The others sat sullenly silent. Comprehension, an understanding of what Kunanbai desired, shone only in the eyes of Karatai and Maibasars.

The circle of aksakals was terminated on the one side by Abai, sitting next to his father, and on the other by the young djiguit* Zhirenshe.

This young man, a relative of Baisal's, hailing from the clan of Kotibak, was not merely a djiguit in the service of Baisal, but a young man of great promise; he was subtle and highly observant. In addition, he was an excel-

* Djiguit—an expert horse-rider.—*Tr.*

lent story-teller and jester. Abai still remembered some of his jests, and he was the only man with whom the boy would have liked to have a heart-to-heart talk.

But to all appearances—and whether it was more than that one could not tell—Zhirenshe was entirely engrossed in what Kunanbai was saying, and seemed to be totally oblivious of Abai and everyone else.

When Zhirenshe stirred at last and frowned, Abai noticed that his father's speech was coming to a close.

"The infamy of that scoundrel Kodar brings shame on me before this council, it is a disgrace to our tribe and to all of us!" He turned his piercing eye from Suyundik to Baisai and then fixed it on Bozhei.

Neither Bozhei nor Baisai moved, but there was an agitated stir among the others. The weight of Kunanbai's words lay upon the shoulders of every man present.

"Honour means more than death! An unprecedented crime demands an unprecedented punishment," thundered Kunanbai.

In the flinty tone of his voice rang out an irrevocable judgement. Everyone knew that nothing could make Kunanbai relent once he had reached a decision.

There were but two things for the men to do: to wrangle, show signs of rebellion and risk an open quarrel, or, as Baisai and Bozhei had so often done, to swallow their disagreement and let Kunanbai act alone: let him bear all the responsibility and take all the consequences!

When their personal interests were not involved they were usually sparing of words, expressing themselves vaguely and ambiguously. But this time Kunanbai had not left them a single loophole, and each felt himself trapped. The silence was oppressive.

Abai did not know Kodar, but before him arose the image of Kodar from the song "Kozy-Korpesh and Bayan-Slu."* The fact that his father had called him a scoun-

* In this epic poem Kodar perpetrated cruel and treacherous crimes to win the beautiful Bayan-Slu.—*Ed.*

drel, too, fitted the Kodar of the song which the akyn* Baikokshe had sung to his mothers in that very tent the year before. For a moment Abai thought that the name of Kodar had been deliberately applied to someone who resembled the hero of that song.

Karatai was the first to break the silence, speaking smoothly and deliberately.

"That is truly monstrous! And God forbid that such things should happen to our sons or daughters! If Kodar has committed this crime his place is among the infidels," he began.

Then cautiously and evasively, with a question here and a hint there, he expressed his doubts: what they were saying about Kodar was perhaps not true, after all?

Among those present Suyundik alone was a kinsman of Kodar. That was why Kunanbai had kept his eyes on him throughout his speech. If he could convince Suyundik of Kodar's heinous crime, the man would be condemned by his own kin and the entire consequences would rest fully upon Suyundik and his tribe.

But Suyundik was by no means convinced of Kodar's guilt. Karatai's stratagem had showed him the way, and he eagerly caught at the words "... was perhaps not true, after all?"

"If his guilt can be proved," he said, "then let him die now! May his heart be pierced! But who can vouch for the truth of this?"

Kunanbai stiffened. Leaning forward heavily, he said:

"Eh, Suyundik, Albasty** truly lies in wait for those who are weak! A weak-willed, hesitating leader will bring evil upon himself. You would like us to pledge our souls for Kodar, to swear to his honesty and innocence? You would like us to justify him, and in the next world

* Akyn—a bard.—*Ed.*

** Albasty—an evil spirit.—*Ed.*

take his guilt upon ourselves? No—I have no souls to spare!” And suddenly he shouted at the stupefied Suyundik, “And you, can you vouch for Kodar? Will you take your oath on him? Will you pledge your soul?”

This challenge broke down Suyundik’s resistance.

“I have no souls to spare either! I only said that it was necessary to be sure. And I did not come here to sell my soul,” he added sullenly.

It was clear to all that Suyundik was beginning to yield, and Kunanbai was quick to take advantage of this.

“If you do not believe us,” he said, “you should at least believe the people who are everywhere proclaiming the infamy of Kodar! Ours are not the only people who say so. Strangers threw it up at us yesterday at the counsel! They also know about it. Try and convince them that they are wrong! Try and shut their mouths! Have you the strength to do this? Then go and do it: vindicate him, or condemn him! But do not sit there hemming and hawing!”

Suyundik could find no answer. After a brief silence Baisal spoke up. Cool and unperturbed as ever, he glanced at Kunanbai.

“If we find that Kodar is guilty, what shall his punishment be?” he asked without emotion.

Kunanbai replied:

“So monstrous a crime has never been known among the Kazakhs. Nor do we know the punishment it deserves. That will be determined by the Sharia.* Let the law take its course.”

Kunanbai had been speaking in an exasperated, bitter voice, but now he altered his tone—he too seemed to be oppressed.

All avenues of argument were blocked, and each elder felt he had been brought to a halt, like a horse come suddenly upon a blank wall. Again there was silence.

* Sharia—statute book of the religious and secular duties of the Moslems.—*Ed.*

Bozhei thought to himself: surely the Sharia would go into everything. They could not be going to hurl themselves upon a man just like that. He dared not speak his thoughts, however. Kunanbai would have lashed him with a scathing reply. Bozhei preferred to say nothing.

Karatai, though, was too impatient to remain quiet.

"And what does the Sharia say?"

Kunanbai turned to Zhumabai, who was sitting some distance away, as though he had just discovered his presence.

"I sent Zhumabai to the town to learn the verdict from the Khazret Akhmet-Riza. The penalty is hanging by the neck," he said.

"Hanging?" Karatai was horrified.

Bozhei turned a questioning gaze upon Kunanbai and looked at him steadily. Kunanbai's face was as if carved from stone.

"Is there no other solution? He may be a mad dog, but he is a kinsman of ours," said Bozhei.

Again Kunanbai's voice thundered.

"May all feelings depart from him who feels for Kodar! Who are we to quarrel with the Sharia? If it were not a question of Kodar, but of the happiness of my whole life, I still would not flinch or waver!"

It was clear that there was no noose that could rope in this wild horse of the steppes.

"If you are certain, then do as you think best," faltered Bozhei.

Baisal did not say a word.

Suyundik took the path indicated by Bozhei:

"It is you who rule over the people, and this evil-doer too is in your hands," he said. "The culprit and his victim alike rely on your wisdom. We demand but one thing: whatever penalty you decide, first establish the truth. As for the rest, let it be as you will."

The other elders echoed Suyundik's words.

"Establish the truth and then do as you will!"

Their acquiescence, however, was only superficial. An undeclared struggle smoldered on throughout the evening. There were insinuations and evasions, but no one dared risk an open conflict with Kunanbai.

Bozhei sensed that this Kodar affair was some manoeuvre on Kunanbai's part and that there was more to it than met the eye. Where would it lead? But whatever the outcome, Kunanbai alone would have to answer for the consequences: no one had sided up with him. He probably understood very clearly that the others had left themselves a free hand to continue the struggle.

But while the aul elders secretly hoped to keep clear of the matter, Kunanbai had one or two things left to say: his stratagem had been thought out to the minutest detail.

In the hands of the six elders lay the fate of the thousands of families of the Tobikty tribe, the whole network of tribal and family affairs with its tangle of inter-relations, intrigues and plots. At their disposal were innumerable combinations, surprise moves, a finely woven net of human cunning.

On becoming Aga-Sultan, Kunanbai had risen above the rest. In his hands lay the power. He was linked with the outer world, with the highest authorities, who respected him and valued his opinion. Moreover, he was acquisitive, a man of wealth. He was never at a loss for words, and cut an impressive figure. Dogged and persistent, he never gave up until he had got what he wanted, and adapting himself skilfully to the circumstances, he imposed his will on all who surrounded him.

But if the Tobikty tribe was the source of Kunanbai's strength, it was also the source of his weakness. As an old Kazakh saying has it: "Wings for soaring, and a tail for descending." These elders were both "wings" and "tail" for Kunanbai.

During the past year he had felt their confidence in him waning, until there was an invisible barrier of distrust separating them from him. Kunanbai was acutely aware

of this, but no one as yet ventured to risk an open break with him; they all gave in to him. This was important, for strong and vested with authority though he was, he had yet to reckon with another power, the judgement of the tribe. In the eyes of the tribe the elders were no less responsible for the cruel sentence they had passed than he. If Kunanbai were called to account for this, the others would have to answer as well. They would have to prove that the sentence was just—no matter what they thought about it now. And so Kunanbai pretended to suspect nothing.

Though the Tobikty were made up of many clans and families, all the power lay in the hands of the five or six of them whose aksakals were gathered in Kunanbai's tent. They set the tribal course of action, they laid down the law. They were the chieftains of the Tobikty.

One of these, Bozhei, who was sitting on Kunanbai's right, came from the influential clan of Zhigitek, which had produced the tenacious, stubborn chieftain Kengirbai of yore. The clan was renowned for its crop of dare-devils, fond of raiding, cattle stealing and all kinds of risky ventures. A boisterous, unruly lot, those Zhigitek.

Baisal was the elder of the Kotibak clan. One of the largest and most powerful in the region, it was often compared to a herd of wild horses. The Kotibak were herdsmen, and year by year seized more and more land. Conscious of their strength, they would stop at no crime.

Suyundik hailed from the Bokenshi, the smallest and poorest of the clans. Through its maternal lineage it was related to the small clan of the Borsak. Kodar, the object of Kunanbai's wrath, belonged to this group.

Kunanbai himself came from the Irgizbai clan, which though less numerous than the Zhigitek and Kotibak, was immeasurably richer. From generation to generation the Irgizbai had maintained their influence and leading position among the Tobikty.

Kunanbai was more closely related to Baisai than to Bozhei and Suyundik, and he had always depended on the Kotibak for men and general support. That is why he sought to uphold his influence among this big tribe.

Karatai stood somewhat apart from the others. He was the elder of the ancient tribe of Kokshe, which was remotely related to all the others. And though this group was by no means large, its capable and resourceful leader cunningly availed himself of his kinship with the other tribes. He was always well informed and took part in all the vital decisions of the tribal council.

Everything said or resolved upon by the elders would unquestioningly be accepted by all the Tobikty, old and young alike.

Maibasar, Kunanbai's brother, who now sat at his side, had withdrawn from his friends and even from Kunanbai's nearest relations when he was appointed head of the volost. Though gentle as a lamb in the presence of Kunanbai, he was nonetheless the hard-bitten, cruel leader of those of the Irgizbai who were interested in maintaining Kunanbai's high position and authority.

It was over Maibasar that Bozhei had first fallen out with Kunanbai. Two months before, at the request of the people, who were infuriated by Maibasar's brutality, Bozhei had approached Kunanbai with the demand that his brother be removed from office. Kunanbai had refused. He knew of Maibasar's cruelty, but needed the presence of a man who could serve as a reflection of his own invincible strength and unbending severity. When Maibasar's savage rule could no longer be endured, the people would be compelled to come to him, Kunanbai, for protection. Maibasar, therefore, would serve as a constant reminder that the authority wielded by Kunanbai was no trifling matter.

To turn the conversation from Kodar, Kunanbai asked the old men about their cattle and pastures and told them when to start moving and where to go. It was agreed

again to camp that year on the Chinghis Range. True, the pastures on the other side of the range belonged to the Kerei tribe, but the auls could be set up in their immediate vicinity, and then move gradually along the river-banks, in the secret hope of eventually seizing the Kerei's pasture-land.

The tension was somewhat relieved, and everyone now spoke freely, without evasions. Zhirenshe winked at Abai and nodded towards the door.

Abai still did not know who Kodar was or what he had done. The word "hanging" had made him shudder and he had regarded Kunanbai with horror at the realization that his father was capable of insisting on such a cruel penalty. The boy could not remember anyone ever having been hanged in the steppes; he had never heard of such a punishment being inflicted. The terrible word carried his mind back to the tales of the distant times of Harun-al-Rashid; it was associated with alien lands—Baghdad, Egypt and Ghazni. "All that talk about hanging is just a threat," he thought. "Such a thing cannot happen here."

Only now did he realize why Zhumabai had gone to the town. He was dumbfounded! They had been together for so many days and the old man had not said a word about it. A messenger of death, with the dread words of the Sharia locked in his heart, had ridden at his side, raced over the steppe with him, jested and humoured him! And now Zhumabai sat silent, as though nothing here concerned him at all! Abai stared at Zhumabai and wondered at the strangeness of grown-ups. "If I were grown-up myself," he thought, "I would understand them better. I would know their intentions."

Now he recalled that Zhumabai's conduct during their stay in the town had puzzled him at the time. On their arrival the old man had led a sleek, four-year-old dark-grey horse from the courtyard, saying, "This must be presented to the khazret as a present from your father."

The old man had wanted to know where the boy's tutor Mullah Akhmet-Riza, the chief priest of the mosque, lived, and had demanded that he lead the way to the man's house.

Entering the mullah's courtyard, they had set about tethering the horse. The mullah had noticed them, and must have guessed at once that the animal was to be offered to him as a gift, but had held his peace. Zhumabai had then greeted him on behalf of Kunanbai.

"He begs you to bestow a blessing on his son, your pupil, who stands before you now."

"Allah, great and merciful, will reward you with His bountiful hand!" the khazret chanted, and raising his hands, gave his blessing.

Without waiting for a seemly pretext, Zhumabai had interrupted the khazret's flow of florid expressions, and bluntly stated his mission: Kunanbai wished to know the opinion of the learned khazret on a very special matter. Pausing, he had looked significantly* at the khazret and then at the boy. The holy man had understood him at once.

"Ibragim,* my child, go to the madrasah and come back before you set off for the aul so that I can give you my blessing."

The boy had obeyed.

Now the whole thing was clear to Abai. Zhumabai had informed the khazret of Kunanbai's desire for a cruel punishment for Kodar.

What was there to keep Abai in the yurta now? He could expect no friendly words or welcoming glances here. He slipped out of the tent to find Zhirenshe, and came upon him hobbling his horse before turning the animal out to graze. In the dim light of the yurta door Zhirenshe saw the boy and quietly called to him:

* Ibragim was Abai's Moslem name. Abai was a name of endearment given him by his mother.—*Ed.*

"Abai, come over here!"

The impatient question was out of Abai's mouth before he reached his friend's side:

"Oh, Zhirenshe, who is Kodar, the man they were speaking of? And what has he done?"

"Kodar? He's a poor, lonely man of the Borsak."

"And where is he now?"

"He lives on the Chinghis, at the bottom of the Bokenshi Pass."

"And what has he done?"

"They say that when his son died this year, he took up with his daughter-in-law."

"Took up? What do you mean?"

"Oh, he just lived with her."

"I don't understand!"

"What a fool you are! Don't you know what I mean? Well, like the camels—the male and the female.... Do you understand now?" An obscene gesture completed the explanation.

Zhirenshe had been bored with the aksakals and was glad to be out in the fresh spring air. He would have liked to play with the boy, but Abai was in no mood for games; his face remained very earnest. Zhirenshe's words had disturbed him deeply.

"Is that *really* true?"

"Well, no one knows for sure. But there have been rumours. That's why Suyundik insists on verifying the truth of it," replied Zhirenshe.

"Then perhaps it's not true after all?"

"There are many who think so. You see, when Kuneken* attended the gathering of the Sibani tribe, Soltabai taunted him with it in front of everybody. It happened like this: Kuneken had told him they ought not to use nasibai.** The man flared up and answered: 'Nasibai is

* Kuneken—a respectful form of addressing Kunanbai.—Ed.

** Nasibai—chewing tobacco.—Ed.

no great sin, and you would do better to restrain that hairy witch nesting on your Chinghis slopes and wreaking all sorts of evil there!" Kuneken was beside himself with fury. As you've seen, he's not himself even now—as black as a thunder-cloud."

Abai visualized his father, glowering and terrible as he was when he had pronounced the word "hanging." For a moment the boy stood frowning. Then with a heavy sigh he turned sharply and went off to the tent of his mothers. Zhirenshe called out—he had something more to say—but the boy walked on and soon disappeared in the darkness.

3

Kodar was slowly eating the gruel of millet and sheep cheese his daughter-in-law had warmed up for him.

"Kamka, my dear, is it not Friday today?" he asked.

"Yes, it is Friday, and I must go to the grave and say a prayer." Sighing bitterly, she added, "I dreamed of him last night—it was just as though he were alive."

"Oh, dear God, dear God," Kodar sighed in return, and it seemed that the grief that filled his powerful chest was wrenched out by that one great sigh. Could empty visions soothe the heart? He too had dreamed of Kut-zhan, his only son. But where was the solace? Kamka seemed to be comforted by such dreams. Well, let her talk about it. Let her young heart ease itself this way. He was ready to listen to her.

"I saw him as he was in life, riding up to our yurt. He dismounted, cheerful and bright as always, came in and said, 'You and father are weeping too much. I often hear you moaning. Do you think I'm really dead? You see for yourself I've come back. Enough, Kamka! Don't weep any more. Be cheerful!' That's what he said, and I was so happy!"

The old man and the young woman sat silent, their cheeks wet with tears.

All was quiet around except for a strange howling noise which Kamka had heard several mornings running.

Lifting her pale face, she listened. The rims of her eyes were red, and a blue vein throbbed on her temple.

"It's only the wind on the mountain-side," he explained.

"Why is it moaning that way?"

"It's the roof on that old shed. The rushes have grown loose, and the accursed things sing in the wind," he said to reassure her.

Together they went out.

Their tent, wretchedly dark and patched all over, huddled against a small shed. There was no sign of life in the neighbourhood—not one hut or yurta. The neighbouring auls had long since drifted to their summer quarters.

When he was alive and well, Kutzhan had often said, "Don't let's become zhataks! Let's move with the rest!" He had always managed to find the two or three camels needed to move his family with the others. They had hardly known what trouble was in those days. There had been no need to worry about pastures or how to make ends meet. "It is good to travel with the aul," Kodar would say. "We shall have plenty of milk and perhaps even borrow a cow for the summer." And they had moved on, nomads like the rest.

But this summer neither Kamka nor the old man had the heart to leave Kutzhan's grave untended.

Their herd was small, and even if their animals had grazed day and night, they could scarcely have depleted a hundredth part of the pastures on the slopes of the Chinghis. In the winter, after the death of his son, Kodar had invited an old kinsman to stay with him—poor old Zhampeis, a single man who had neither family nor shelter, and earned his livelihood by labouring for others. "Two halves make a whole! Upon whom should we depend

if not on ourselves? Let us live by helping one another," Kodar urged him when Zhampeis came to say a prayer over Kutzhan's grave. And so the homeless old man had come to stay with them.

Now there was no need to worry about the small herd, and at home too there was little to do. The two spent all their days at the grave—the old man bent with age and trouble and the young woman crushed with grief. Today, too, they moved quietly towards the last resting place of Kutzhan.

It was a bright day in May, one that seemed especially kind and friendly. The steppeland was flooded with golden sunlight. Only a few strands of white floated in the blue of the sky. The rolling hills were already covered with green, and the young grass was thick enough to form the softest of carpets sprinkled with snowdrops, tulips, marigolds, wild irises and poppies—a myriad of reds, yellows and blues just as though a swarm of butterflies were flitting over it. Chill as ever, the morning breeze from the mountain pass served to temper the heat and to refresh everything it touched.

But all these flashes of life, the turbulent joy of nature's rebirth, passed unnoticed by the stricken pair, who had eyes for only one thing—the fresh grave with its mound of stones on the hillock ahead. It was this alone that drew them irresistibly. The flowers and the saplings reminded them only of the spring of the year before, when cheerful Kutzhan had been alive. And a fresh wave of anguish swept over them.

Kodar, who had but recently reached his sixtieth year, was a greying man of powerful build. Other than his irreconcilable loss nothing in the world could have broken him; life pulsated too strongly within him. He had been a giant of a man in his youth. In those days no one could vie with him in skill and daring. All his life he had vigilantly defended the honour of his name from anything that might have sullied it. He had never envied

those who were gluttonous for power or drunk with vain-glory. Always keeping to himself, he had been satisfied with the little he possessed and had led a quiet and secluded life in the midst of his family. He had never cared to visit the auls of strangers or to take part in gossiping and backbiting, and was scarcely known even to the members of his own aul. He sought the company of none but his own kinsmen among the Borsaks and Bokenshi.

Six months before, misfortune—the death of his only son Kutzhan—had swooped down on him like a hawk and tore at his heart to this day.

What could he hope for now? Who was there to comfort him? He knew that fate was unrelenting, and that brooding was of no avail, but still he could not drive away his melancholy thoughts.

His daughter-in-law Kamka was wilting before his eyes, bereft of will, petrified by grief. What was in store for her? His heart was afraid to answer that question. When he thought that she too might leave him and become a stranger, he felt as if he were reliving the terrible hours of Kutzhan's death. It would be a second bereavement. Had he not been a father to them both?

Kamka and Kutzhan had loved each other and lived so well together! A poor orphan of the distant tribe of Sibani, she had come to love her new home. Kutzhan had met her while visiting his mother's relatives and had taken her away the very night he first saw her. Kodar was no less attached to her than to his son. In the simpleness of his heart he had believed that this love for his children would fill his life until the end of his days.

Sometime previously Zhampeis had told him of some sordid gossip he had heard from the other shepherds in the mountains. Kodar understood little of it, but that little was enough to enrage him and he bade his kinsman hold his tongue. How could people who lived so well and without a care in the world be driven so mad by their

idleness as to invent such tales? They must be out of their minds. "Why does Kodar keep to his home, like a beast to its lair?" they asked. "Why doesn't he ever show himself?" To this others would add with a sneer, "And why does his daughter-in-law stay at home all the time? What is she thinking of?"

These insinuations had weighed heavily upon Kodar. He suspected that all this loose talk only meant that he ought to find a husband for her and let her marry without receiving bride money—in other words, they wanted to force an heir upon him who would seize possession of his property and cattle. To think that such treacherous schemes were being hatched up by those who called themselves his kinsmen and had pretended to commiserate with him! Estranging himself from everybody, Kodar refused to see anyone. If they would only leave her alone for at least a year! He did not want to think any further ahead. But the chill breath of slander had penetrated his solitude.

When Zhampeis saw Kodar's face darken, he understood that it was better not to rub salt in his wounds. Taciturn by nature, it was a great effort for him to express his thoughts, and he said no more.

This was how he had learned about the rumour. The old shepherd Aitimbet had asked him bluntly on the pasture one day:

"They say that Kodar's living with his daughter-in-law. D'you know anything about it?"

Zhampeis had been outraged.

"I'll be thrice damned if ever I heard anything so disgraceful! And you, prevaricator, don't you dare say such things!" He shook with anger.

For a moment Aitimbet was not sure whether Zhampeis was seeking to shield his kinsman or whether he was genuinely horrified by the accusation. But Aitimbet was not a slanderer or gossip, and was forced to the conclusion: "If the poor fellow had really known

anything, he wouldn't have got so excited. Either those two are really innocent, or old Zhampeis suspects nothing..." Aitimbet dwelt not far away and was easily able to question the poor folk who at times visited Kodar; finally he came to the conclusion that the latter was quite innocent and a victim of slander.

But it was of little avail that Kodar's poor neighbours, who knew the true state of affairs, argued with the slander-mongers in the old man's defence. Someone was diligently weaving a web of lies, so that the slander, far from subsiding, attained such proportions that it enveloped Kodar like a poisonous haze.

Poor Kodar was apparently not to be left to grieve over one single misfortune—now he was to be troubled with this other burden. Three days before, Suyundik had deliberately sent the chatterer Bekten to him. The latter had summoned Kodar from the yurta and after going round and round and beating about the bush had at last blurted out:

"It's impossible to stop all the talk! Kindly people sympathize with you and have tried to put an end to the slander, but they haven't succeeded." Here he brought in Suyundik's name and, as though in passing, heaped him with praise. Then after tormenting Kodar with various hints and insinuations, he baldly declared, "They're saying terrible things about you and your daughter-in-law!"

Kodar started.

"Eh, what's that rubbish you're telling me?" There was fury in his voice, as though he was ready to hurl himself upon Bekten.

"Well, Kunanbai believes this gossip and is preparing a terrible punishment for you," Bekten continued, unperturbed. "But can Suyundik leave a kinsman in the lurch? He has sent me here on purpose: 'Let Kodar hide somewhere, as far away as possible, until the storm blows over!'"

"Get out of here! Out of my sight! What do I care for Kunanbai's punishment when God himself has not spared me? Begone, I tell you!" Kodar was beside himself with rage.

The insult had rankled to this day, and Kodar felt his blood rise when he thought of it. But he would not have dreamt of speaking to Kamka about it, although his fatherly heart was entirely free of pangs of conscience. To him Kamka was as his own beloved daughter. Day by day they had shared their common burden, their grief, their sighs and their thoughts. So close had they gradually become that it seemed at times as if both were old folk who had come through life side by side. They understood each other well, could speak about anything quite frankly and openly. Nevertheless Kodar could not bring himself to tell his daughter-in-law of that monstrous slander—he felt physically incapable of uttering the words.

Slowly they approached the lonely grave. Kodar knew none of the set prayers, nor had Kamka ever learned them. Here they were wont to make up their own, silent prayers, sharing their woes with Kutzhan and gently rebuking him for leaving them.

Many were the times they had sunk to their knees and, clinging to one another, had looked at the grave through their tears. They knew every pebble in the mound. If the wind laid a few withered blades of grass among the stones, they at once cleared them away; if stones or earth slipped from their accustomed places, they would heap them up afresh.

Today too they sat for a long time by the grave.

Suddenly there was a clatter of hoofs behind them, and some riders approached them, neither Kodar nor Kamka turning to see who they were.

There were five of them: Kamisbai, the messenger of Maibasar, Zhetpis, a distant relation of Kodar, and three

djiguits of Kodar's clan, the Borsak. Dismounting, Kamisbai muttered:

"See what he is doing, the hypocrite!"

They had not expected to find Kodar and Kamka at the grave. Other men would have been moved at the sight of these two sunk in their sorrow, and Kamisbai's companions at first hesitated to dismount. But their leader was cunning and cruel: if he had to cut off a hair he would sever the whole head. Maibasars himself was not more cruel.

"Dismount!" he commanded.

Among his companions there was one who was of a mind with him.

"See, they won't even turn their heads! He seems to have been rooted to the spot!" Zhetpis snarled.

Realizing at last that these men had not come here by chance, Kodar turned and quietly asked:

"What do you want, good people?"

"Your presence is required by the chief of the volost!" Kamisbai shouted. "All the elders have gathered in Kara-shoky, all the noblest of the aksakals. They are waiting for you!"

"Who are these elders, and who is the chief?"

"The chief is Maibasars and his superior is Aga-Sultan Kumanbai. You and your daughter-in-law are to answer before them. Get up and come with us!"

"Are you mad? What have I to do with you?"

"What's that you say? What have you to do with us? The chief calls you, that's what!"

"May you be damned with your threats!" Kamka sprang up, quivering with anger.

"You yourselves will be damned, you hairy witch! Come at once!" roared Kamisbai menacing them with his whip. Turning to the djiguits, he commanded, "Seize them and set them on the horses!"

The djiguits flung themselves upon Kodar.

"Oh, God, what more do you want from me?" Kodar cried desperately and struck out at the two nearest djiguits. One of them fell to the ground, but the three others hurled themselves on the old man. Twisting his arms behind him, they tied him securely. Kamka was simply dragged from the grave and lifted on to the horse of Kamisbai, who sat behind her.

Zhetpis, a giant of a man, sat behind Kodar. The others quickly mounted and the whole party set off at a gallop towards the east, to Karashoky. "The sword has been drawn and the bullet has been fired. Why trouble to talk to these beasts?" thought Kodar. "I'll speak to the chieftain himself." And all the way he said not a word, not even to Zhetpis, his kinsman.

Yet it was Zhetpis and his crafty brother Zheksen who were the very cause of this fresh calamity which had come upon Kodar and Kamka.

Of all Kodar's relations these two were the wealthiest, and in the spring, after the death of Kutzhan, people had begun to rebuke Zheksen: Kodar was a near relative, they said. He was poor, had lost his son, and was utterly alone, but Zheksen was doing nothing to help him. He would not even lend him the draught animals necessary for migration, and had left Kodar behind at the winter quarters. So frequent became these reproaches that Zheksen had begun to seek a justification for his callousness.

"My heart has always been revolted by evil," he said. "It is not that I do not want to help him, but that I am repelled by his infamy." This he had declared at a crowded gathering of the Bokenshi and Borsak clans; and this it was that had given rise to the slander.

Very soon Suyundik had demanded to know what Zheksen's hints implied.

"It appears that he has taken up with his daughter-in-law," said Zheksen. "What do you want me to do? If I accept him in my home you yourself will spit upon me tomorrow!" And to give credence to his words, he related

what Kodar had said in the spring at Kutzhan's funeral, on the seventh day after his death.

Beside himself with grief Kodar had then exclaimed, "No one is left to me! I am alone! God has seen fit to punish me. Very well then! I would rather die a giaour than bow to his authority. If God has chosen me as a victim, I shall repay him in kind!"

"Now what can he do to the Almighty?" and Zheksen had finally insinuated that Kodar had revenged himself on God by living with his daughter-in-law.

In reality, however, Zheksen was concerned with quite another aspect of the matter. Kodar had a small plot of land in the vicinity of Zheksen's winter quarters. "It's all over with Kodar anyway," he thought. "If I can induce the tribe to drive him away, the land will be mine." This was a tempting morsel.

Like flames over dry grass the gossip spread until it reached Kumanbai, and then came the thunderbolt. At a large gathering of the Sibai tribe Soltabai had several times brought up the name of Kodar to shame the Tobikty. When the news reached Suyundik, the latter realized that things had gone too far. Once more he visited Zheksen and demanded proof. Not satisfied with this alone, he had questioned the people living near Kodar. Plain people to whom all intrigue was foreign, they had not the slightest doubt of his innocence. They could only relate how stricken the old man had been by the loss of his son.

But Zheksen and Zhetpis had insisted that this was not the truth.

"He's only pretending," they said. "When night falls there's something different on his mind."

Once again Suyundik failed to establish the truth. But he was afraid that if the rumours were confirmed, Kumanbai would avail himself of this pretext to descend on the Bokenshi and Borsak, and when talking with the elders of the other clans he stubbornly insisted, "It is slander!"

He had intended to defend Kodar at Kunanbai's council too, but there the latter had cut him short.

To make matters worse, that fool Bekten whom he had sent to Kodar had spent the night on his way back at Zheksen's house and chattered about everything under the sun.

Kodar, he declared, had said, "I recognize neither God nor Kunanbai! I do as I please! What affair is it of yours?"

"And then he drove me away!"

To make it all sound more interesting, Bekten had given a highly coloured account of what had gone on and had slandered Kodar right and left.

After the council in Kunanbai's yurta Suyundik had tried to quieten his conscience by urging himself to believe that Kodar was guilty.

In this way, although no one knew anything for certain, Kodar was caught up in a terrible calamity.

4

Karashoky, one of the pre-eminences of the Chinghis Range, rose not far from Kodar's winter quarters. Down its luxuriantly wooded slopes rushed a mountain torrent, whose banks were lined with willows, aspen and twisted mountain birch, magnificent in their spring array. There was an abundance of verdant pastures, and though these had been held challenged by the Bokenshi and Borsak for as many years as anyone could remember, many of the Irgizbai families had long ago fastened a jealous eye on Karashoky, where the aul of Zheksen stood.

The aul consisted of four yurtas shielded from the winds by a great rock overhanging the river. This was the gathering place to which Kodar and Kamka were being taken.

"There they come! There comes Kodar!" Many voices were raised.

All those who had been sitting in Zheksen's tent now emerged, with Kunanbai at their head. The crowd in the field beyond the aul rapidly grew, though the djiguits were still some distance off.

In the centre of the field lay a huge black camel tethered to a post. Between his humps was a great mass of felt, topped by a saddle, and a long rope was coiled round the whole thing.

Kamka, who had not said a word all the way, shuddered at the sight of the crowd and turned to Kamisbai:

"Listen, you are a human being. What have we done? What do you intend to do with us? Kill us, if you like, but tell us first why...."

Kamisbai too had been silent, but now he spoke, his words filled with venom:

"You have sinned with your father-in-law, with Kodar? So today you will be put to death!"

Kamka moaned and began to slip from the horse, almost dragging Kamisbai from the saddle. Clutching her firmly, he quickly rode towards the crowd, where Kodar was already being lifted down from the horse. In the centre of the field, Kamisbai dismounted, still supporting Kamka with one hand. He then lifted her down, but she sank limply to the earth, insensible.

Kodar came face to face with a crowd of a hundred or so: Kunanbai, Bozhei, Karatai, Suyundik, Maibasar and other elders of the Tobikty. Behind them stood the aksakals and other prominent men. None were to be seen who were poorly or even modestly attired. These were all *atkaminers*,* the most influential men from the most important clans.

Kodar, his arms bound, looked at them. He was seething with hatred, and as he recognized Kunanbai, whose single eye was balefully fixed upon him, a shudder ran through his whole body.

* *Atkaminer*—the elder tribal chieftain.—*Ed.*

"Uah, Kunanbai! You think I have not been sufficiently punished by the Almighty? What fresh vileness have you prepared for me?"

He was interrupted by shouts from Maibasars and the others.

"Enough of your chatter! Enough!"

"Hold your tongue!"

"Shut your mouth!" There were outraged cries from all sides. Never had anyone been known to address Kunanbai with such effrontery.

Kodar waited for the noise to subside.

"Do you want to avenge yourself on fate for the loss of your eye by bringing shame on me?" he raged.

"Shut his mouth!" roared Kunanbai.

Maibasars ran towards the old man, brandishing his whip:

"You damned grey cur!"

Kodar's voice rose still louder:

"If I'm a grey cur, you're blood-thirsty dogs! Hurling yourselves on people, tearing them to pieces."

With the help of four djiguits, Kamisbais dragged Kodar away, but the old man went on shouting with all the power he could muster:

"Am I guilty or innocent—you don't want to know, you murderers!" And he looked at Kunanbai with terrible mien.

But the noose was already around his neck, and the four djiguits dragged him to the side of the black camel, thrusting a bag over his head. It was as much as six men could do to hold him, to keep him pinned against the camel's side. As he opened his mouth to roar a final curse he felt something stir violently behind him. The camel was rising to its feet. There was an iron grip upon the old man's throat, a grip that seemed to be crushing the very soul out of him. He felt a fearful weight, like a vast rock. The whole world seemed to fall upon him. He saw

one last flickering flame of life—and then came oblivion. The silence of death brooded over the crowd.

When the camel had risen completely, Kamka was hanged on the other side. To her death came instantly.

But spasmodic convulsions still gripped Kodar's body. Death could not quickly conquer that Herculean frame. He seemed to have increased in stature and his toes nearly reached the ground. The onlookers stood hushed and still.

Baisai could look no longer, and turned aside. Others tried to speak, but could only whisper. Karatai quietly remarked to Bozhei:

"How long the poor wretch is suffering. He just won't die. . . . Only now I see what a giant he was!"

Bozhei looked at him, his face sombre:

"Your giant has been devoured by a jackal!" He too turned aside.

"Alive! . . . He's still alive!" There were murmurs in the crowd.

Shudders continued to rack Kodar's body.

Kunanbai could hear the murmur swelling. The torments of the victim moved the onlookers more than the murder itself. Gesturing briefly, he commanded that the camel be forced to its knees.

When the animal had sunk down, Kamka's lifeless body remained standing for an instant and then lay prone. Kodar, still alive, tumbled in a heap. Without giving anyone time to think, Kunanbai pointed to the peak.

"Carry him to the summit, and let him be thrown from there, the accursed one!"

Kamisbai and four others silently flung Kodar across the back of the camel and ascended the peak from the other side, which sloped gently. The crowd, on the point of breaking up, was immediately checked by Kunanbai's fierce command: "Stay! Let none go away!" and again stood immobile.

Two riders emerged from the woods. They dismounted, tied their horses to a post at the last of the yurtas and walked towards the crowd. It was Zhirenshe and Abai.

And meantime the five carrying Kodar had appeared on top of the cliff. At a signal from Kunanbai the four djiguits had swung the heavy body and let Kodar fly from the summit overhanging the meadow.

The mighty body flew through the air and struck the earth heavily, directly in front of the crowd, and those on the edge heard the sound of shattering bones.

By this time Zhirenshe and Abai had reached the crowd. Following all eyes to the summit, they had looked up and seen the body of a man flying through the air, his billowing garments outspread like the wings of a great bird. Zhirenshe rushed forward. Abai pressed his hands over his eyes and sank to the earth. It was all over. . . . The unfortunate man had perished.

If only they had come in time, he could have pleaded with his father to spare Kodar. But he was too late, and he could not bear to look at these people. His one idea was to hurry to his horse and dash off somewhere. At that moment the crowd came to life:

"Pick it up!"

"Do it yourself!"

"And what are you here for!"

There were shouts from all sides, now mingling in a general hubbub, now rising one above the other. Some reached for stones. "A fight," thought the boy.

But no one was thinking of fighting. No sooner had the corpse struck the ground than Kunanbai had given a fresh command:

"There's still life in him. To rid ourselves of this accursed one, let the forty chosen men of the forty clans of the Tobikty hurl stones upon him! Come now! One man from every clan—pick up your stones!"

Kunanbai had himself stooped for a stone and, turning to Bozhei and Baisai, repeated peremptorily:

"Pick up your stones!"

The two obeyed.

"So it is commanded in the Sharia! Throw!" Kunanbai had shouted and hurled the first stone upon Kodar's chest.

That was why some stooped for stones, while others began to quarrel, urging each other to begin.

Going closer the boy saw them throwing their stones, one by one. Zhirenshe prodded Abai and whispered:

"You see that old man? That's Kodar's kinsman Zheksen! You know him? What an old curl!"

At this moment it seemed to Abai that Zheksen was a real murderer, and the boy rushed towards him. But the man had already raised his arm to throw, and as he shouted, "May you perish, you rotten one!" a big stone struck the corpse.

It was only then that Abai saw Kodar's body. The skull had already been crushed.... Abai's heart bled, fury swelled within him.

"You old devil," he shrieked and struck Zheksen in the back.

Zheksen turned sharply, no doubt thinking that a stone had accidentally hit him. But before him stood the son of Kunanbai.

"You vicious old curl!" shouted Abai.

Zheksen was taken aback.

"What's the matter with you, boy? Am I alone to blame? If you are so troubled about it, there's your father behind you," he muttered, somewhat at a loss.

Agitation spread among the crowd.

"What's happened? What's the matter?"

But Abai had already run for his horse. As he untied the animal he heard the sounds of sobbing from the last of the yurtas.

Those were the women and children, who had been driven into that yurta before the execution. Some women

shook with sobs, others sat quietly moaning. None dared to weep aloud, but none could restrain their tears.

Abai felt as though an arrow had pierced his heart. Leaping into the saddle with one bound, he galloped off into the steppes.

Zheksen had probably complained to Kunanbai, for the boy heard his father shouting angrily:

"Wait, you scoundrel! You'll catch it from me!"

But Kunanbai did no more than threaten. He could not bring himself to call him back.

Abai headed for his aul, with Zhirenshe dashing after him.

"Heh, madman! Wait, Abai! Wait, you donkey!" he cried, shouting fresh abuse as it came into his head.

And the two soon disappeared in the valley.

Having accomplished their task of killing two human beings the crowd dispersed in all directions. The elders rode off in silence.

"In the old days one could demand recompense for the murder of a kinsman," Bozhei said with a sigh, as he rode along with Suyundik and Karatai. "But try to do it now. It's better to hold one's tongue! I helped to kill him myself! From forty families we threw stones with our own hands. As if one could say anything about it now!"

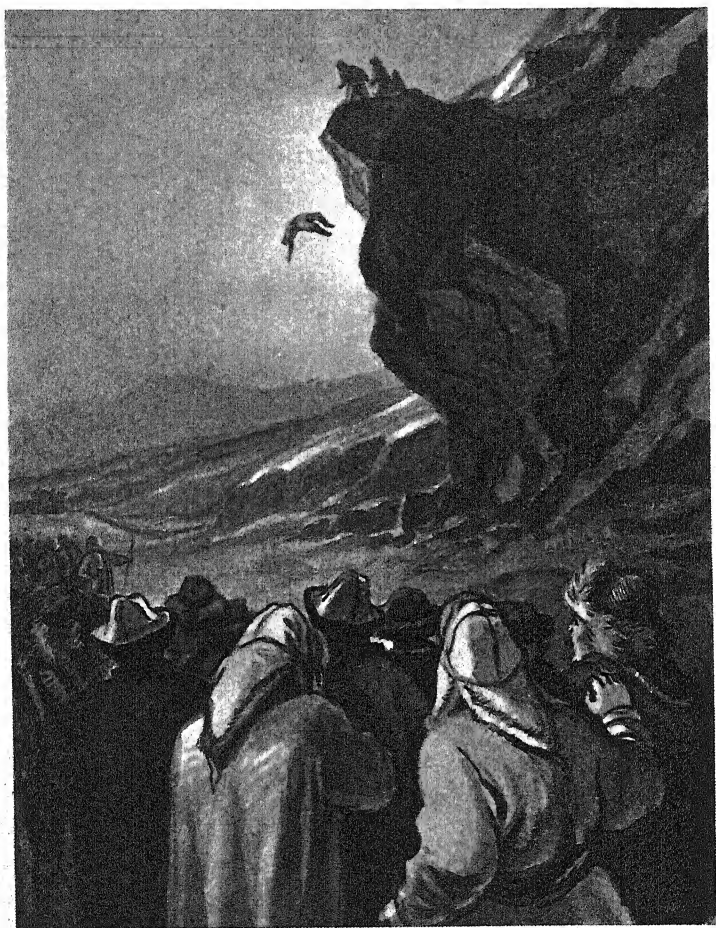
"The most terrible part of the Sharia's injunction was concealed by Kunanbai until the very end," added Karatai. "It seems that there is plenty of room for trickery and cunning in the law! The Sharia seems to work for Kunanbai!"

Suyundik was in low spirits.

"Let us forget all that has happened! I pray God that the matter ends here," he declared.

But Bozhei was a man of experience and understood Kunanbai better than the others did.

"Ends here?" he said bitterly. "Bokenshi and Borsak, mark my words well: It was not around Kodar's neck that





you placed a noose today. It was around your own necks that you placed a noose—with God's help!"

All three were sorely troubled. No one cared to speak again and they travelled on in silence.

5

Neither Abai nor Zhirenshe had expected to witness such a gruesome scene. The aksakals and the elders had kept their secret well, and no one had suspected what was afoot.

That morning Zhirenshe had gone to Kunanbai's aul to show Abai his new hound of the tiger breed. The appearance of the dog created a great sensation, children swarming from the yurtas to look at it. The chief instigator of the bedlam that followed was Ospan as usual.

No sooner had Zhirenshe ridden up to the Guest Yurta with his dog than Ospan raised the cry:

"Seize him, seize him! At him! Zholdiyak, Borbasar!"*

This stirred up a whole pack of dogs.

"Ospan, my dear boy!" Zhirenshe tried to dissuade him. "You're a sensible boy and shouldn't do such things! Please stop it!"

But Ospan was impervious to flattery.

"Borbasar, ait, ait!" he screamed, laughing wildly, as he flew through the aul and drove more and more dogs to the scene.

Zhirenshe had managed to get to the Guest Yurta. He jumped from his horse to protect his hound from the attackers. A dozen or so sheep-dogs came leaping from behind the tents and, snarling viciously, formed a close circle around him. Zhirenshe dared not move—and the more he pleaded with Ospan, the louder the youngster laughed as he goaded the dogs on.

* Zholdiyak, Borbasar—names of dogs.—Ed.

"Ar-r-r!" he encouraged them, darting forward himself.

But the old sheep-dogs soon tired of the game. They were too lazy to attack so helpless a quarry and sat about growling and barking.

The noise finally reached Ulzhan in the Great Yurta.

"Go and get those wretched dogs away. That little fool's stirring up trouble again!" she said to Abai, who was having his breakfast.

Abai quickly drove the dogs off and took Zhirenshe into the Guest Yurta. Deprived of his sport, Ospan stole up behind Zhirenshe and gave him a sharp pinch in the calf. Thinking he had been bitten by a dog the young man leapt into the air and struck his head against the door-frame. With one bound he was in the centre of the yurta.

"Coward, coward," Ospan jeered.

Zhirenshe's graceful hound, with its wide ruff, black face, and curiously striped fur, delighted Abai.

"What do you call him?" he asked.

"Zhelkuiin."*

"That's a good name."

"It certainly suits him. He's a real whirlwind. No hare can get away from him."

Zhirenshe liked to repeat these words of praise, which had first been uttered by a well-known hunter in his aul.

"Let's hunt some hares then!" Abai suggested.

"Certainly. Have you a horse? I was just thinking of going hunting."

While Abai's four-year-old bay was being saddled the two friends drank mare's milk in the yurta.

Then they rode off to the west, to the low hills known as the Kzilshoky.

They hunted with all the fury and passion of born hunters. The hare they were after kept clear of them for a long time, and it was only when three or four chains of

* Zhelkuiin—whirlwind.—Ed.

hills had been left behind that Zhelkuiin overtook and seized it. They wandered on vainly searching for game until they reached the remote eminence of Kzilshoky, near the Chinghis Range.

There they met another rider, Maibasars messenger Zhumagul.

"You ought to ride to Karashoky," he advised Zhirenshe. "Kodar's being tried there today and everyone's flocking there."

Zhireshe pricked up his ears.

"And where is Kodar? Where is his daughter-in-law?"

"The djiguits have been sent to fetch them both. They are to be taken to the aul of Zheksen." Zhumagul lashed his horse and rode off.

"Let's go, Abai, and see what's happening!" Zhireshe eagerly suggested. "Come, let's go!" He drew the boy after him without giving him a chance to argue about it.

And so it happened that the execution had occurred before their very eyes.

Now they were riding back through the woods along the river-bank. An icy chill gripped Abais heart, and all his feelings seemed numbed with horror at his fathers action, at the blood on Kunanbai's hands. It was his own father who was so cruel, so heartless!

He paid no heed to Zhireshe's shouts, but galloped on at top speed. The hound flew by his side as the two of them darted along the bank and then skirted the slopes of one of the larger ridges. The way was narrow, a path along which one could only ride in single file, and talking was difficult. But Zhireshe at last overtook Abai and riding close behind talked incessantly. He had managed to exchange a few words with the djiguits in Zheksen's aul and he wanted to share what he had heard with Abai. Shaking as though with fever, the boy heard only half his words, but understood their essence.

Two phrases were on everyone's lips. One had served as a pretext for Kodars accusation and was cited to jus-

tify his monstrous execution. Kodar had said, "God has stricken me and I shall pay him back"—so his murderers today declared. The other was the last phrase that Kodar had hurled at them before his death, "If I am a grey cur, you are blood-thirsty dogs!"

Abai was shaken to the core. He recalled the pitiful, repressed sobbing of the women in the yurta. Unexpectedly, even to himself, he suddenly began to weep. Zhiren-she could see this, although he rode behind.

"What's the matter with you, you scamp, you Tekebai!* What's the matter?" he asked in surprise and lashed his horse so that he could ride beside the boy.

But the latter, too, struck his horse and darted ahead.

They had already left the ravines behind and were coming into the broad valley. Abai turned his bay towards Kolgainar and urged him on again, not wanting Zhiren-she to see his tears. The young man tried hard to overtake him, but the boy was leading by an arrow's flight, and finding himself alone in the steppes gave full vent to his tears.

He had not wept for years, but now it was as though he were melting—he could scarcely breathe for sobbing. He spurred his horse on, and the steppes rolled by like the wide rivers of spring, turbulent and swift, mighty and exhilarating. The wind lashed against his face and swept away the tears.

Never before had Abai suffered like this. What had he known of human misery? But now he was plunged into its very depths, and his whole being responded with great intensity of emotion. He was overcome with pity for those two guiltless human beings who had died so fearfully tormented and abused. A great rage and hatred welled up in his breast.

"Father"—what a dear, fond word! There was a voice within him that spoke up persistently for his father, set-

* Tekebai—stubborn little donkey.

ting him apart from all that was cruel and steeped in crime. Yet another voice kept repeating the story of today's frightful murder. The horror of it confused his thoughts, pitted them one against the other.

He recalled the words he had been taught at the madrasah: "Human tears shall mitigate the sinner's guilt and atone for his crime." Could he believe that his own tears would serve to atone for the murderers? He rejected the idea: "This is not true!"

The murderers had claimed that they were killing to uphold the holy faith, in the letter of the law as laid down by the Imam. So there was no one to whom one could complain? So he was alone in a silent wilderness? He felt helpless, like an orphan with no place to lay his head. And his grief broke out anew, a fresh wave of pain welled up from depths unknown and heavily smote his frail childish spirit. Abai was seized with another fit of weeping, the tears streaming down his cheeks. Sobs broke from him like cries of pain. If only Zhirenshe did not hear! He kept well ahead, his horse hammering the turf.

Perhaps it was the motion of the horse or else his agitation had been stronger than he could bear, but suddenly he was overcome with violent nausea. Body and soul were racked with pain. But he would not check his pace, and clutching the mane of his steed to keep from falling, he continued the mad gallop. Zhirenshe could not overtake him.

Abai dismounted at Kolgainar and made for his mother's yurt. Ulzhan stood at the entrance and her heart contracted. Her son was deathly pale, his face like that of a stranger. "Am I dreaming?" she wondered, and peered at him. Of course it was Abai, but how awful he looked! His horse tethered, he came up to her, and she at once saw that his eyes were red from crying.

"Abai-zhan, my darling, what has happened? What have they done to you?" She grew agitated and wondered if he had been beaten by his father.

They were alone. Abai silently embraced his mother, pressed his feverish head to her breast and stood very still. How could he have forgotten—he had his mother! He was not defenceless and alone!

He began to tremble as though weeping violently, but there were no tears in his eyes now.

"Tell me, sun of my life, what has happened? Has your father beaten you?"

"No, no one's beaten me. I'll tell you all about it later. . . . Apa, arrange my bed, please, I am sleepy." They entered the tent, their arms about each other.

Ulzhan was patient: she would say nothing more just now. Why worry the boy? She arranged his bed in the right-hand side of the yurta, near the couch of Zereh, laid him down and quietly covered him with her fox fur-coat.

But Grandmother at once noticed that something was wrong.

"What's the matter, my sweet? Are you ill?" she asked.

"Yes, he is not well," Ulzhan hastened to answer. "Just leave him alone, let him sleep."

"Close the tunduk* to keep the sun out of his eyes," she whispered to her servant, "and let down the screen over the doorway."

Grandmother looked intently at Abai, but he turned to the wall. She was astonished, and then her lips began to move in silent prayer.

Ulzhan wondered where Zhirenshe could be. The dogs began to bark and she went into the open to see. Zhirenshe stood tethering his horse before the Guest Yurta, and she called him to her.

Zhirenshe related everything: how they had hunted a hare in the morning, what had happened at Zheksen's

* Tunduk—a rectangular cloth covering the upper aperture of the tent.—Ed.

aul, and how strangely Abai had behaved on the way back. Finally, he asked:

"Where is he now?"

Ulzhan told him that Abai was sleeping. She looked the young man over coldly, and a note of irritation crept into her voice:

"You are not a child," she said, "and you should know what you are about. It was bad enough for you to go to such a place, but why did you take Abai there? He's only a boy! You should know that he might get a bad fright, that it might make him ill."

Zhirenshe blushed with shame.

"Yes, I was sorry afterwards. But I swear we never expected to see Kodar killed."

"Well, never take Abai to such a place again. And stay away from such places yourself—you are only a boy, after all."

Crestfallen, Zhirenshe hung his head and scratched at the sand with the handle of his riding-whip. When Ulzhan withdrew, he remounted and rode away with his hound.

It was not until evening, when the flocks came back and the aul was filled with the bleating of sheep, that Abai awoke. It was late—the sheep were being milked—and quite dark. There were noises on all sides—and grizzly shapes, dim and indistinct, dancing before Abai's eyes. His head seemed to be splitting with pain, he was very hot, as though on fire, his mouth dry and lips parched. He tried hard to wet them and swallow, but could not.

His mother and grandmother sat near. Ulzhan placed her palm on his forehead.

"Apa. . . Grandma. . . Am I ill?" he asked.

"Yes, you're very hot. Where does it hurt?" asked Ulzhan.

He moved on to his side and complained that he felt a sharp pain in his temples.

While he had been asleep Ulzhan had told her mother-

in-law of all that had happened, and both concluded, "He was badly frightened—and so he's ill!" Zereh fumed at Zhirenshe and all the aksakals. Furiously, she spat on the ground.

Abai at once noticed that they knew everything.

"Father!... Father!..." the thought flashed through his mind. Sighing deeply, he passed his hand over his chest and said almost in a whisper, "How cruel he is! How heartless!..."

This was the first time that he had uttered these thoughts which had been crowding into his brain in disjointed and half-conscious fragments.

Grandmother could not hear, and, as Ulzhan said nothing, she prodded her daughter-in-law with her knee. What had Abai said?

"He spoke of his father. He says he is cruel. Why didn't he have pity on them?" Ulzhan whispered to her.

Zereh sighed painfully and, gazing at the boy, went on stroking his head for a long time.

"My beloved lambkin... He has no pity, you say? He doesn't know what pity means!"

Her old face raised, her eyes half-closed, she whispered:

"Oh, dear God, hear my prayer! Spare this darling of my soul the wrath of his father. Spare the child his cruelty and heartlessness, Almighty God." With trembling fingers she blessed her grandchild.

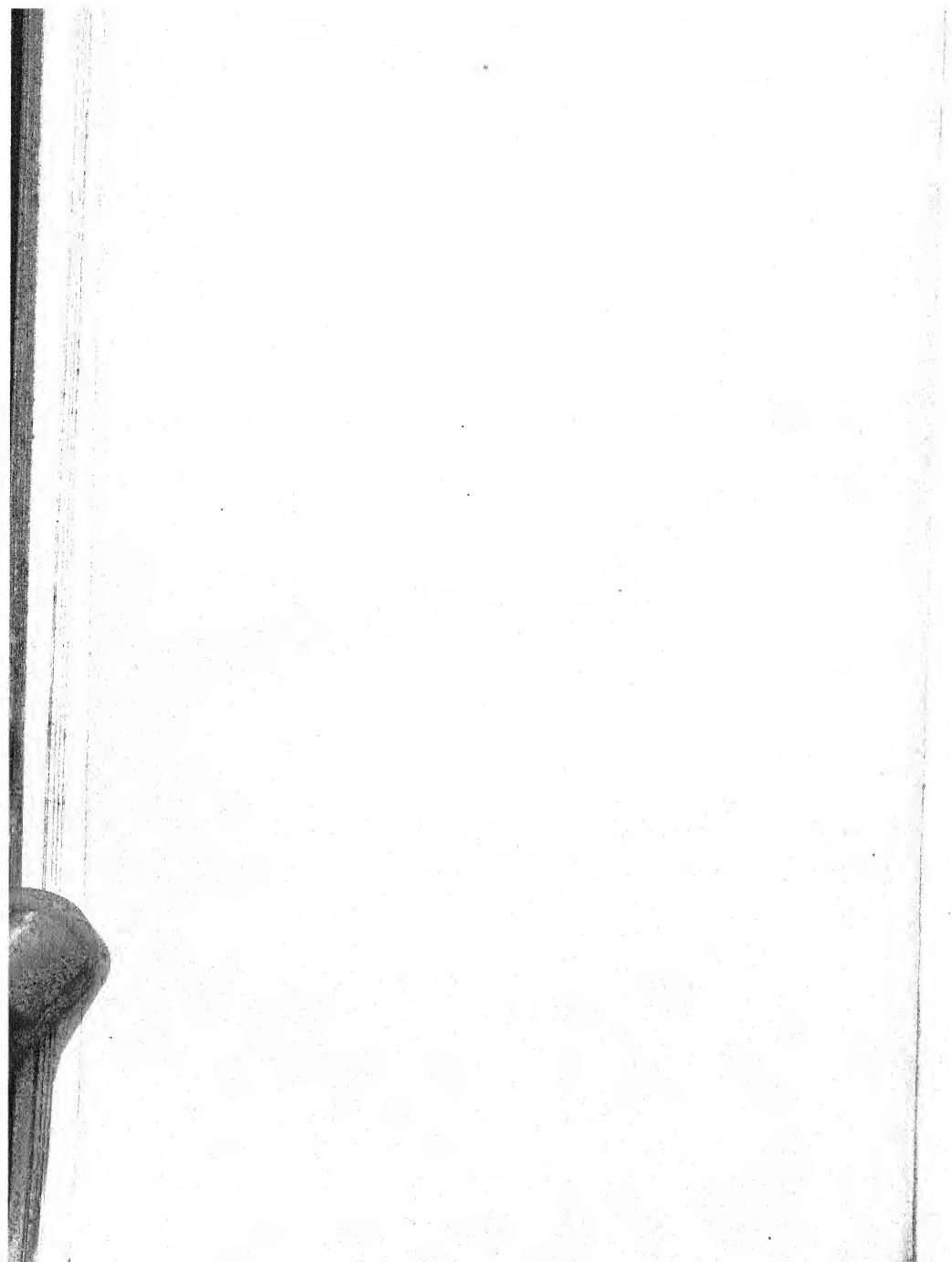
"Amen," whispered Ulzhan.

Abai too passed his hands over his face.

These were two mothers... Between them lay a child who had been wounded to the heart; and in that strange twilight, when the forces of darkness range the earth seeking for their victims, these three prayed silently for peace, kindness and love.

To Abai it seemed that he had again returned to the carefree joys of childhood with its bright clarity and peace. His heart was relieved. But the pain in his head increased and he grew more feverish.





In the tent all was still. The bleating of the lambs and sheep died down, and the steppes were unusually quiet.

Suddenly a doleful cry sounded over the aul, a heart-rending call.

"Oh, my own, my very own," wailed someone riding by on a horse.

This was the customary cry when someone died. A djiguit would ride through the aul wailing, and the tidings of grief always began with the words: "Oh, my own, my very own!" Ulzhan listened with dread. Had something happened to those near and dear to her? Perhaps to Kunanbai? She listened trembling. But she must have been mistaken, confused by fear: there was no horse out there. And then the cry was raised again, very near.

Abai was the first to understand: it was a child's voice, cunningly disguised to resemble the ritual wailing of the grown-ups. It was Ospan howling.

As he returned from the fields, he had raised the cry, though his elders had told him that such a jest might bring bad luck.

"Oh, my own, my very own Kodar," he shrieked, slapping his hips and skipping among the tents.

The tidings of Kodar's death had quickly reached the auls and had at once been taken up by the boy. He had gathered his band of youngsters and practised the funeral cry with them at the riverside. They had found a dry bone, buried it with due ceremony and rushed off in various directions with much shouting and wailing.

Ulzhan was very angry: Abai was sick and that scamp had frightened everyone.

"Come here, my boy," she said. "Come here!"

She spoke calmly, careful to show no sign of irritation. If she were to scold him, he would make the usual retorts and run away to safety. Now he ran through the tent without fear and with one leap bounded into his mother's lap.

Ulzhan caught him by the left hand.

"What are you thinking of? You were warned not to shout out the funeral cry, because it would lead to something evil! And you go in for such jokes at a time when Abai lies ill. Blockhead!" Shaking him severely, she wheeled him round and slapped him soundly several times.

Ospan never wept when beaten by his father, because the latter paid no attention to his tears. But when spanked by his mother, he howled like a little demon. Now, too, he began to shriek as loudly as he could. Then breaking away, he ran to the tall bed on the left of the yurta and flung himself upon it, face down, howling. But this time his tears could not soften Ulzhan. She would do nothing to soothe him, as Ospan soon realized. His tears had dried, but he pretended to cry on, from time to time giving a heart-rending scream. Eventually tiring of this, he returned to his original device. He began to repeat, at first cautiously:

"Oh, my own, my very own!"

Stealthily he glanced at his mother, but she did not stir. He tried it again and finally sang out boldly:

"Oh, my own, my very own Abai!"

Abai's head hurt him abominably, yet he could not help laughing.

But now Ospan saw the ponderous figure of his mother stirring. She was apparently going to rise. Anticipating trouble he bounced from the bed.

"Oh, my own, my very own Abai! Abai! Abai!" he cried, flew for the door and was gone before she could catch him.

"Catch him! Catch him and bring him here to me!" she called.

Ospan paraded to and fro several times in front of the yurta, but then darted towards the furthest end of the aul: he had noticed—just in time—that his elder brother Takezhan was about to do his mother's bidding.

Abai lay ill for a long time. Some said he was stricken with ushik;* others said it was sokpa;* still others thought it was typhoid, but no one could say just what it was. Nor did anyone try to cure him.

It was only once, on the second day of his sickness, that his grandmother ordered an old woman to take him out at sunset and slap him several times with the steaming lungs of a sheep that had just been slaughtered.

"Perish away, you evil spirit! Perish away and depart from my son," she cried and, turning Abai to the setting sun, continued the strange cure by sprinkling water upon him from her mouth.

Abai's knees were threatening to give way. His head was spinning and he had found it difficult to walk out of the tent. Perhaps it was because he was dizzy that the westering skies seemed so queer. Was this a fairy-tale or a dream? In that delirious world everything was different and strange....

Two days later, the aul set off for the Chinghis. In the previous few days the men engaged with the preparations had inquired of all travellers whether the ground had thawed well at the zhailyau site, was the ground dry and was there sufficient grass? The foothills of the Chinghis thawed quickly as a rule and were soon covered with thick grass. The slopes, on the other hand, warmed up slowly and the green was meagre there. The snow was too deep to melt away quickly.

The broad and well-watered zhailyau of the Tobikty lay on the other side of the Chinghis Range. No sooner had Kunanbai's aul set off from Kolgainar than the neighbouring auls too were on the move. The Tobikty advanced

* Ushik and sokpa—the names of ailments resulting from catching cold.—Ed.

like an avalanche along all the trails and paths that led to the mountain passes.

Had Abai been well, he would have enjoyed these delightful days of merry-making and sport. The spring migration, so difficult a time for the grown-ups—the shepherds, the herdsmen and the “neighbours”—was for the children and adolescents a time of joy. In past years the ten stages of the journey from Kolgainar to the Baikoshkar River, which lay beyond the Chinghis, had been one great holiday for Abai.

This year the aul was to travel the same route. Abai knew all the halting places. Some were to be reached at daybreak and the aul would spend the whole day there, moving on at nightfall. Eager to reach their summer quarters, the auls travelled as fast as they could. The big tents, therefore, were not to be set up even at stopping places where two or three days would be spent. Only the small yurtas were to be put up, the light tents and huts.* Each arranged his dwelling according to his taste, just as he pleased, as though all who wandered to zhailyau had agreed to play at “aul-aul,” “house and hut,” and “kurkeh-kurkeh.”**

* During the nomadic wandering the yurtas were dismantled and transported on camels or pack-horses. The erection of a yurta required several hours, beginning with the setting up of the so-called keregeh, large grids which were placed in a circle to form the lower walls. To these, long poles, the uiki, were fastened and bent to form the yurta's crown, which was secured by a ring called the shanrak. The skeleton of the yurta now complete, it received a covering of coarse felt or richer felt cloth often ornamented with appliqué work of coloured fabrics. The size of a yurta depended upon the height of the keregeh, which formed the side walls (between two and three and a half metres), and also upon their number. The smallest yurta had three keregeh, the richer yurtas as many as six or eight (the hexagonal and octagonal yurtas). On festive occasions (weddings, the reception of important personages, or for councils held to appoint new dignitaries) two or three of the yurtas were put together, and a part of the keregeh was removed to form an arched passage for entry.—*Ed.*

** Children's games.—*Ed.*

During the migration even those of the auls which ordinarily lay far removed from one another drew together for the journey. They seemed to come from nowhere, and merged in an endless stream. All the families were thrown together, their flocks got mixed up, and it was difficult to distinguish one aul from another.

But if the wandering was pleasurable to some, it was a source of endless worry and trouble to the herdsmen: one moment the unsaddled horses would stray into the droves of strangers, then the lambs of one aul would get hopelessly mixed up with those of another, or the flocks of sheep would be confused in such a way that no one could tell them apart. In this disorder the lambs and sheep of the defenceless poor often came into the possession of those who were not averse to seizing the property of others, guided as they were by the old saying: "Keep it with your finger and close your eyes!" On such occasions there were not a few who, sparing their own flocks, slaughtered their live "surplus" after dark and hurriedly devoured the half-cooked meat round their fires.

The auls this year had set off in a compact band and moved over the steppes together. The wolves ranging this wild region in entire packs constantly harried the nomads and compelled them to travel as close to one another as possible. Before the journey the wolves had run about the slopes of the mountains preying on mice and other small animals; but now, under cover of dark, they attacked the flocks, which in most cases were guarded by men on horseback from dusk till dawn. Fires were kept going around the camps and noises were made until daybreak. How different were these days of surprise and danger from the usual quiet life of the auls! By day all were on horseback and in movement, the men armed with spears, soeels and pole-axes, somewhat like a great body of armed cavalry on march.

Though conducted as usual, the wandering this year was painfully difficult for Abai. He was no longer in pain, but was still far from well. At the slightest attempt to move about everything went black, his head spun and he fell helplessly to the ground. But the wandering could not be delayed because a boy was ill.

Kunanbai usually came to see Ulzhan about once every three or four days. He spent most of the time with his youngest wife, the beautiful Aigiz, but often visited his eldest wife, Kunkeh. She had her own aul, and it was with this party that Kunanbai travelled. When Abai had been taken ill he had asked about him once or twice, but had then seemed to forget the boy.

Abai could not ride a horse. He could have been mounted on a camel, but this his mother would not allow. "The pack may slip off, or the camel may trip," she said. "It is too dangerous."

The nomads were not familiar with wagons or carriages, and the only one in the aul, among all the tribes of the Tobikty for that matter, was the blue wagon of Grandmother Zereh and her daughter-in-law Ulzhan, which Kunanbai had bought in Karkaralinsk when he was elected Aga-Sultan. "You will ride in this wagon during the wanderings," he had told his mother.

Ulzhan too found it increasingly difficult to ride over the hills on horseback—she was growing old and stout. But now she could think only of Abai. Sacrificing comfort, she placed the boy in the wagon with his grandmother and, mounting a gentle bay mare, herself kept constantly behind the wagon.

The journey to the summer quarters took three weeks and it was only at the end of this time that Abai was able to move about and leave the tent without assistance.

His spirits too revived and he might have been expected to recover his former boyish, carefree cheerfulness. But strangely enough, the playing and gambolling of the

youngsters did not interest him at all this year, and the games he had been so fond of no longer tempted him. It was as though he had lost his childhood. Was it the effect of his illness, or had the torments recently endured cast a spell over him? Was this the end of his childhood, the threshold of maturity? But he had not yet attained maturity—something had brought him to a halt midway. It was as if he had run up against a high wall and stood confused and frustrated.

This year he turned thirteen, and in appearance, too, he stood somewhere midway, neither child nor youth. He was tall, his arms and legs had grown longer. Formerly his nose had seemed slightly turned up at the end—now it was distinctly straighter. His face was earnest beyond his years, but there was much in his figure that had an unfinished look. He was tall and thin, like a plant that had sprung up in the dark: pale and weak, with a thin, fragile stem.

Once his olive cheeks had displayed the bloom of health. Now, either because of his prolonged stay in the town or his illness, his face was pallid and his black hair had become so thin that the skin shone through; it was clear at first sight that he had been ill and had not been out in the sunshine for a long time.

His nature too had undergone a great change. He could have ridden horseback now, but felt no inclination to do so. He avoided the boys of his own age and found other friends—the best of them, his grandmother, and next his mother.

It was only that year that Abai fully realized what a wonderful story-teller his grandmother could be. Her words charmed the ear and gripped the imagination.

Unable to fall asleep for pain one day during his illness, Abai had begged his grandmother to tell him a story. Old Zereh had reflected for a moment and had then

begun to speak—and they were not words that she had strung together, but an endless string of pearls.

*The mists have hidden away the centuries
And who, my dear, shall tell their mysteries?*

she began in a sing-song. The words fastened themselves in Abai's memory, and on the next occasion he had only to touch her knee and remind her:

*The mists have hidden away the centuries
And who, my dear, shall tell their mysteries?*

This came to be his way of pleading for new stories.

Zereh knew many of them: "Edil-Zhaik," "Zhupar-Koriga," "Kula-Mergen" and other legends. Abai made her tell them to him from morning till evening, even during the migration journey.

And when he was well at last, old Zereh did not discontinue her stories. She told of things she had seen herself and of things she had heard from others, and the stories of strife between the tribes took several days on end. The boy learned how, some twenty or thirty years before, the Naiman tribe had fallen upon their aul; how Zereh's foster-son Bostanbek had been killed and how the Naiman tribe's bard Kozhamberdy had been taken prisoner and kept in chains for a year and a half. Zereh knew all his long epics by heart. She told her grandson of other events—of the battle of Karamorsk and of many other things. Then she passed on to the sad tales of Kalmakan and Mamir, Yenlik and Kebek.

Abai never tired of her stories and hung on her words, an earnest, absorbed expression on his face. When she was weary and could speak no more, he would go to his mother. Ulzhan too knew many stories, but he was pleased most of all when she recited poems. He knew that she could neither read nor write and that no one had asked her to repeat these verses for many years. And the fact

that she had cherished them in her memory astonished and delighted him. For days on end she could chant the zhirs,* the aitises,** the edifying songs, and facetious rhymes.

To tempt the women to tell fresh stories Abai often read verses to them from the books he had brought from the town. He read the poem of "Jusup and Zyuleika," translating and interpreting the unfamiliar Persian words. This inevitably prodded their memories and set them telling stories again.

But how dreadful were Zereh's stories of forays and plunder, of the horror of raids, of grief and bitter humiliation.

Once, at the height of their story-telling two guests arrived at the aul, travellers from afar: an old man and a young one. Abai knew the younger man very well and was delighted to see him. He was the akyn Baikokshe, who had visited them the year before at the zhailyau camp and for three days had chanted for them the song of "Kozy-Korpesh and Bayan-Slu." The older man was a stranger to Abai, though Ulzhan knew him well.

When greetings had been exchanged and all questions about family and household affairs answered, Ulzhan turned smilingly to Abai.

"There, my son—you have plagued both Grandmother and me. . . . But now you have before you a real treasure of stories and songs. This is the akyn Barlas."

Barlas's narrow beard of silver, his venerable bearing and musical voice at once won the boy's heart. He did not look at all like the other old men who tried to keep everything they knew to themselves. Frank by nature, outspoken and talkative, he behaved from the first like a man who had spent all his life in this aul, as one of the family.

* Zhir—a tale in verses, usually dealing with history.—*Ed.*

** Aitis—poetic rivalry, verses composed at poetry contests.—*Ed.*

"This is what they say, my son," he would tell Abai with a gentle smile.

*Enraptured, the listener's borne along
On the magic stream of the akyn's song!*

"Blessed are those who can tell and hear. If Abai will not tire of hearing, Baikokshe will not tire of telling."

After they had settled in zhailyau Ulzhan often received guests from other auls, and Barlas, who belonged to the Sibani tribe nearby, had come to visit his old friends. On the way he had been joined by Baikokshe, of the Mamai tribe. The latter, a pupil of Barlas, spent several months every summer in the company of his teacher who wandered from aul to aul.

The hospitality with which they were received at once put both akyns in excellent spirits. In the evening, while the meat was being cooked, Barlas sang the song of "Koblandy-Batir." To Abai it seemed that he had never heard or read anything so beautiful. When Barlas had finished and rose to wash his hands Abai asked:

"What was the name of the man who composed that song?"

"It is said that the song has come down to us from olden times, my child. But Sadaken claims to have heard it from Marabai."

The Sadaken mentioned by Barlas was none other than the illustrious akyn Sadak.

Abai was especially impressed by Koblandy's farewell, the race run by Taiburil and the combat of Kazan and Koblandy. So excited was he by these scenes that he could not fall asleep for a long time that night.

On the following day Ulzhan urged her guests to stay a little more.

"Why hurry away? Please stay with us a few days," she pleaded.

This request was made at Abai's wish. Formerly he had believed that everything wise and instructive was to

be found only in books, that knowledge and art lived in the madrasah alone. What could have equalled Nizami, Navoi, and Fizuli, or the subtle lyricism of Shaikh Saadi, and Khoja Hafiz, or the epic of Firdousi? He had not known that the Kazakhs had such poets as Asan-Kaigy, Bukhar-Zhirau, Marabai, Sadak, and the treasures of "Kozy-Korpesh" and "Akbala-Bazdik."

Whether it was the familiar language of their songs and stories, or the manner in which Barlas and Baikokshe now raised their voices, now modulated them to gentle whispers and then sent them rushing wildly away, or whether it was the sounds of the dombra that fell caressingly on the ear—whatever it was, Abai was convinced that he had never heard anything better than the songs of these akyns.

For days on end Abai would not let them alone from morning until late at night, and Ulzhan's tent became a general gathering place. When the foals had been caught and tethered at noon, the aul people gathered to drink kumys and hear the songs of the akyns. Excited by the strong drink, they listened avidly.

During the day the akyns chanted their long ballads, and in the intervals recited the sayings of the wise men, excerpts from ancient contests and speeches in verses composed by singers of olden times. But when most of the people had returned to their work and only the members of Ulzhan's family remained, Barlas would sing his own songs or those of his contemporaries. From his inexhaustible memory he drew the songs of the akyns Shozhe, Sibanbai, Balta, Alpis and others. Of this endless stream of tales he was particularly fond of those which told of the hopes of his people.

As they listened to these stories, to these words like pearls, each a precious gift to the discerning ear, Abai and his mothers never noticed the deepening dusk. And it seemed to Abai that Barlas at such moments was not

at all like the Barlas who has sung during the day. The Barlas of the day had sung only jestingly, to caress the spirits, while the evening Barlas became a teacher and a thinker.

*The secret of my thought is deep
Deeper than the mists afar;
Grief and loneliness in me weep
For the river which is afar.
Its waters toss and leap,
And rush my song afar.*

"Why is he so sad?" Abai asked his mother.

"There is a great spirit in him," she replied. "He will never stoop to praise that which is unworthy. He will not go from aul to aul to gather gifts. Learn from him and treasure his words."

Abai followed every word of the akyn; he was astonished and pleased with those verses which were born then and there, under the folds of his mother's yurt. They often bitterly condemned the evil doings of the rulers of the land.

*No matter how many the ruler may slay
The lips of the people will ever flay
That thief and killer who rules as bey,
That carrion eater, that bird of prey!*

Abai was glad that his father was away, and he fervently hoped that he would not return for a long time. Fortunately he had not come to see them once while Barlas had been there. He was making the rounds of the auls in the company of several elders, so that Ulzhan was able to detain Barlas. When Kunanbai was at home, the akyns and singers could not stay long and express themselves freely.

Whom did Barlas have in mind when he composed that song about rulers? He would never say for certain, but

Abai interpreted the verses in his own way. Life furnished him many living examples.

Barlas sang:

*At the word of command from on high
Straightaway his tail points to the sky,
He gets busy, then pants for reward.
In us the cur tries to put fear
But himself goes in fear of his lord.*

"That's Maibasars, the head of the volost," thought Abai.

*Before the bey he curves his spine,
If one lamb's lost he takes your nine.
The sheep of the poor drives to his fold,
For what he has found, that he will hold.
For what he steals the aul must pay,
And a beggar must give as much as a bey,
For every man he taxes the same
And the fruit of your labour is gone like a flame.*

Barlas sang this to the accompaniment of the dombra and sighed deeply.

The boy pleaded with the akyns himself and through his mother, and finally induced Barlas and Baikokshe to stay with them an entire month. He grew very friendly with the two, slept beside the couch of Barlas at night and in the daytime did all he could to show his veneration. The old man was very touched by this and one day, when they were alone, he sang:

Abai-shiragim, you're growing fast,
What will you do when boyhood's past?*

Here he tendered his dombra to the boy.

* Shiragim—an affectionate word.—Ed.

"Take it, child, and with it my blessing. I speak from the heart!"

So moved was Abai that words failed him.

That was on the eve of the akyns' departure. In the morning when the horses of the singers were being saddled, Abai called his mother aside.

"Apa, please give them something nice."

To this Ulzhan made no reply, but when the guests had had their fill of kumys she raised her head, about to speak. The others paused and waited politely.

"When my son returned from school he became ill and could not get well," she said. "The songs that you brought to us have made him well. Never were there guests more welcome than you."

Abai reflected how well he had felt throughout their stay. He had, indeed, recovered.

"You must visit us more often," she added. "Grandmother and I will always be glad to see you. May you have a happy journey! Please accept our thanks and the modest gifts which await you outside. Don't take offence, let us part friends."

Abai followed the guests into the open. Two handsome horses were brought up, a sturdy dun for Barlas and a four-year-old bay for Baikokshe.

Leading the horses presented to them, the akyns started on their way shouting, "Khosh! Khosh!"*

A wave of boyish gratitude swept Abai. Embracing the heavy figure of his mother he covered her cheeks, eyes and lips with kisses.

* Khosh—farewell.—Ed

The Whirlwind

I

THE AULS of Kunanbai finished the sheep shearing earlier than usual that year. In the past Kunanbai had never given the order to wander from the autumn pastures to winter quarters before the first snow had fallen. But now he suddenly gave the command at the very beginning of October. None of the other elders knew of his intentions, though they were all closely related to the people of Kunanbai's aul.

Suyundik was puzzled. On a visit to Bozhei he asked:

"What do you make of these latest actions of your kinsman? Why is he so impatient?"

Suyundik and Bozhei were not alone. The third in the tent was the narrow-bearded large-nosed Tusip, senior of the Zhigitek after Bozhei.

"Kunanbai has never done such a thing before," he remarked thoughtfully. "Was there not enough grass to feed his cattle?"

Bozhei looked at him and laughed. Suyundik grew suspicious. Was he concealing something?

"How could there be lack of fodder for his cattle?" he asked with a sigh. "No herds could lay bare such pas-

tures as his! There must be some other reason. His cattle's barely begun to fatten up and he's off to winter quarters. How will he feed the animals until spring? And he's even had his sheep shorn very early this year to enable him to get away."

Again he turned to Bozhei.

"Perhaps you know something? If you do, out with it!"

"Do you suppose Kunanbai consulted me?"

"Even if he did not, you alone can tell us what he's up to. What do you think? I can't understand it at all."

"If Kunanbai had hurried in the spring," began Bozhei, "I should have thought he was out to seize the lands of the Uak. If he had rushed off in the summer, I should have said that he was greedy for the lands of the Kerei. But all the winter pastures in these parts belong to the Tobikty. The winter places of the others lie very far.... May we not see him fall upon his own people.... Remember the tale of the eagle Tneya that attacked its master?"

Bozhei apparently had gloomy forebodings and his words made Suyundik even more agitated. Upon whom would this fresh disaster at which Bozhei hinted fall? Everything seemed so quiet just then....

"It seems to me," he sighed, "that Kunanbai's plucked the lot of us clean enough. He's tormented us to his heart's content. The Zhuantayak have been driven away. From the Anet people he took all there was to take. The Kokshe too have been robbed. What more does he need? From north to south there are thirty camps which belong to him. Here are his spring pastures, there his summer pastures, and yonder his autumn quarters. And of winter quarters, too, he has as many as a man could wish for."

The Irgizbai were much richer in pasture-land than the Zhigitek. This thought was depressing to Tusip. As he

listened to Suyundik he visualized all those fine pasture-lands and sighed morosely.

"His meadows lie no further apart than one can drive a flock of sheep in one day," continued Suyundik.

"Yes, what more does he need?" Tusip agreed. "He has the best meadows, big ponds with good grazing land around them, abundant rivers and vast lakes."

"Others have to crowd together in several clans on the banks of one poor stream. Now his auls, each of them, can choose from a number of good rivers," added Suyundik.

"And all this came to him in so short a time! What more could he want?"

"That's just it: what more does he want?"

Bozhei had been listening silently, but with a wave of the hand he now bitingly remarked:

"If the two of you had any authority to decide things, there'd be some point in the discussion! But what's the point of your complaints?"

For a time he sat very still, looking at Tusip.

"Those who are helpless are always troubled by their thoughts. But idle dreams will get us nowhere. What's the good of talking if you are helpless?" He frowned with something like anger.

Tusip well knew that such thoughts had long been gnawing at Bozhei. The grave of Kengirbai, their great ancestor, lay in Shi, quite near the camps of two related families of the Zhigitek. But the day had come when Kunanbai seized this territory for wintering. That had been a bitter blow to Bozhei and at first he had been determined to fight it out with Kunanbai. The latter, however, had summoned Tusip, whom he easily bent to his will. When he returned, Tusip had tried to dissuade Bozhei, and so the most favourable moment for an attack upon Kunanbai had been lost.

Whether he would or not, Bozhei had to conceal his grudge not being strong enough to take revenge. But

whenever the conversation turned upon Kunanbai he was unable to hide his anger and did his best to provoke Tusip into quarrelling with the Irgizbai chief. "We have had enough talk with Kunanbai," he said. "Now it's time to act. If you are brave, then be a man. If not, then carry on as you are. Submit to him!" He had said the same to Suyundik. Baidal, whom he regarded as a reliable supporter of the Zhigitek, also knew his mind. But with each of the three he had spoken separately and in secret.

2

The auls of Kunanbai reached Kolgainar in seven stages. As they were preparing to make for their various winter quarters, they were suddenly ordered by Kunanbai not to move without his command. Accompanied by Maibasars he rode to the Chinghis Mountains. The distance was not great and the two spent most of the day surveying the district. Returning to the aul at dusk, Kunanbai headed for the yurta of his eldest wife, Kunkeh.

There were many women gathered there that day: the mothers of Kunanbai, the wives of his departed father, the wives of his uncles and the female relatives of two generations. Their auls, some twenty of them, had long since separated from the main body of the Kunanbai household and now wandered independently. They had come to pay the traditional visit and had brought various gifts usual on such occasions.

Twice a year the women of these auls brought such gifts to Kunanbai's yurta—in the spring when the auls reached the kokteu, and in the autumn before separating for wintering. This meeting of old friends was particularly lively in the spring after their long and lonely separation during the winter. The women then would visit everyone in the aul, and first of all Zereh's Great Yurta.

When the door, respectfully opened by Maibasars, revealed the imposing figure of Kunanbai, all laughter and chatter was hushed.

The men sat down, and the only woman who dared to address Kunanbai was Tansholpan, the second wife of his father and second in age to Zereh.

"My son, your mothers and the other elder women here have brought their gifts of the season. We have already paid our respects to your venerable mother, and now we are preparing to go our separate ways."

In Kunanbai's hearing during the past few years Zereh had always been referred to as "venerable mother," and like the others, Tansholpan spoke of her former rival* in this vein. But Kunanbai did not answer. Tansholpan was one of the self-willed mothers of his family. It was said that in her youth she had pursued with spear in hand a group of Kazakhs who had raided the droves of her aul. Tansholpan had four sons, and younger wives with many sons often grew wilful and daring.

She resented Kunanbai's silence.

"It is not Kunkeh we have come to honour, but you; although you are young, you are our chief," she spoke again. "Tomorrow we shall separate to go to our winter quarters, where we shall stay like animals in their lairs until spring. Such is the fate of women. May the gifts I have brought bring you joy in the coming year. They are an offering for your happiness, my son!"

Kunanbai looked at her and nodded.

"You speak of separating for the winter?" he asked after a silence. "But what if we do not separate? You'll have to prepare a fresh round of presents then!"

He smiled significantly. The women at once returned his smile, though none understood his meaning. Kunkeh, tall and dark, with a thin pale face, decided to make the best of Kunanbai's jovial mood.

* The wives of one husband were called *kundes*—rivals.

"But I told the servants to untie the packs and to set up yurtas for all tomorrow. Are we going to wander on? Now we are quite confused. No one knows if we are to stay or go." She looked at Maibasars questioningly.

"But you'll have a fresh round of presents," he said with a smile.

"Don't order the packs to be undone and the yurtas set up," said Kunanbai. "Tomorrow we travel on."

"Do we, my good son? To what new place will you take us?" asked Tansholpan regarding him intently.

"We shall all wander together. Tomorrow at dawn we'll set off for the Chinghis. We've already surveyed the pastures and found places for the auls. Tell this to the men. Let them be ready," replied Kunanbai.

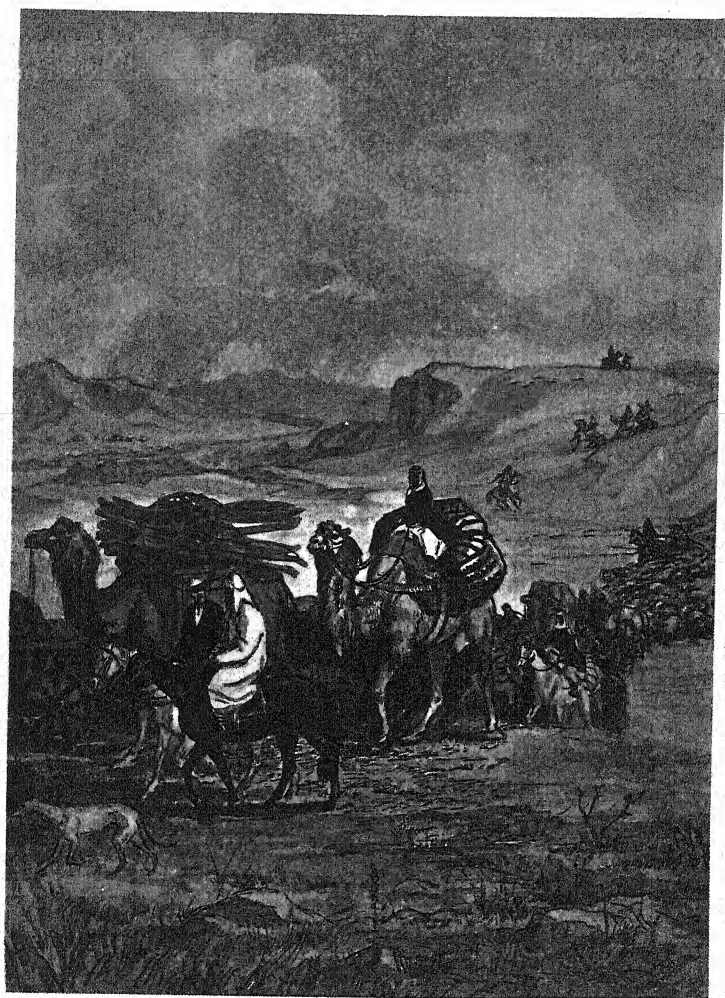
All the twenty auls of the Irgizbai set off at daybreak and made for the heart of the Chinghis.

All moved together and without straggling. During the wandering the auls were usually strung out like a flight of cranes or geese. But now they were bunched together like a flock of ducks menaced by a hawk. This extraordinary wandering began in an unusual manner. At the first sign of dawn Kunanbai had commanded:

"Let there be no loitering! Hurry! And I don't want to see anyone fall back on the way! We all move together and there will be no halts," he told his messengers, who darted on to the various auls.

To the left of the route there loomed a high hill. Kunanbai, accompanied by Maibasars and Kudaiberdy, his eldest son by Kunkeh, rode ahead and climbed to its summit. His bay horse appeared against the dawn sky, curiously large, long and tense. Twitching its ears, the animal seemed to be listening, and turned its head as if impatient with the too slow human stream below. On the hill, high above the people, Kunanbai looked as though he were about to address the throng.

The twenty auls had been up and about before sunrise, packing their animals without the usual noise and shouts.



But now that they were on the move, pandemonium broke loose and all the noises of a nomad caravan filled the air: the scream of a camel whose back was hurt by the sharp thongs of a heavy pack, the whimpering of a young camel separated from its mother, the mad barking of the dogs, the shouts of many riders gathering the pack camels somewhere, the weeping of children and the scolding of mothers. The voices of the herdsmen rose over the flocks and droves on all sides.

When the auls were well underway, Kunanbai turned to Kamisbai and Kudaiberdy:

"Summon all the aul elders," he said.

The two horsemen darted off. Tall, well-knit Kudaiberdy and stocky Kamisbai flew down the slopes towards the head of the human train below. Reaching a group of men riding with the first of the auls, they paused a moment and turned back. Two riders at once left the vanguard and made for the hill where Kunanbai stood waiting.

Before Kudaiberdy could reach the last of the auls, Kunanbai sat surrounded by as many as thirty men. It was a windless autumn day and the cloudless sky reached over the hills, pale and unfathomable. The rim of the great morning sun had scarcely set fire to the distant ranges when riders from all the auls were already streaming towards Kunanbai.

Above them towered the rocky vastness of the Chinghis. Its tall ridges were enveloped in a dawn haze, but a flood of sunshine suddenly lit up the shimmering array of rocks, woods and pastures. Roused by the caravan a multitude of larks swept skyward, and the heavens resounded with their songs. A winged procession of cranes barely visible in the heights endlessly reiterated their curious farewell—"troo-troo."

Kudaiberdy and Kamisbai had made a round of all the auls and now, on foam-flecked horses, returned to Kunanbai, accompanied by three old men. One of these was

Zhakup, Kunanbai's half-brother. Returning their salem, the Irgizbai chief spurred his horse and briefly commanded, "Let's go!"

The hill shook with the thunder of hoofs as Kunanbai, in the company of the elders, moved towards the Chinghis. All along their way the nomads crowded together to let them pass, but the riders did not hurry.

Kunanbai rode in the centre, surrounded by his uncles, brothers, cousins and other relatives.

The only son of Zereh, his father's eldest wife, Kunanbai had inherited the Great Yurta, was the possessor of enormous wealth and wielded unchallenged power. In years too he was the eldest, and there were none among the descendants of his grandfather Irgizbai who dared raise a voice against him. In all the twenty auls there was not a man who would have ventured so much as to express dissatisfaction. And if Kunanbai required support, it was unstintingly given. The force of his will, the very voice of his command drove all before him. Whether it was a matter of seizing the lands of others, or of suppressing the unruly clan, each and every one of the aul elders hastened to respond at the least twitch of his eyebrow. Even in family affairs, so complex and fraught with disagreement, his name alone sufficed to silence any quarrel. The wilful rival wives who were ready to tear each other to pieces were afraid to quarrel openly and noisily. Their husbands' brothers and elder relatives hastened to check the passions of the women, both young and old. The obstreperous were quietened with blows.

The twenty auls solidly grouped about Kunanbai were like a pack of wolves from a common lair. In all the great Tobikty tribe the Irgizbai alone did as they pleased and without restraint. Where authority failed they used brute force. The Irgizbai formed a small but strong and well-knit force sufficient to influence the other clans who belonged to the Tobikty. Those who were useful to them

soon came to be their kinsmen. Guided by the old saying: "The longer the rope the larger the noose," they achieved their aims by roundabout methods. They had at times deliberately drawn others into complex and underhand affairs only to provoke them and then come forward as friends and rescuers. In this manner they constantly enlarged their circle of accomplices and dependents.

Eventually, each of the Irgizbai came to be connected through ties of kinship or friendship with each of the other twenty clans. It was this network which had enabled Kunanbai to wield his present power. The elders who now rode with their Aga-Sultan gave no thought to the destination and purpose of this wandering. "Whatever he decides, it will go well with us. When the time comes, we shall know all about it."

The brisk gait of Kunanbai's large horse compelled his companions to keep moving at a fast trot. Riding a pace or two ahead of his suite, Kunanbai was not unlike an imam who stands forth from the crowd of believers during the prayers. As always, the leading place was his, and if one of the younger riders forged ahead, he was curtly checked by the elders. Kunanbai's single eye missed nothing that went on around him.

Those who surrounded him were all Irgizbai men. In each of the auls there were men from other clans, but they were merely the herdsmen, the watchers, and the "neighbours"—people who did not count when it came to taking decisions.

Kunanbai and his suite outstripped the caravan. He gave instructions to the elders of the twenty auls, told them to which of the plains they were moving and where the yurtas were to stand. There was nothing in his words that invited discussion—this was not a suggestion at a tribal meeting, but a premeditated command.

Six days later, another caravan of nomads was moving along the same route. These were the Bokenshi and Borsak. They too had rounded the Kzilshoky and were headed for the heart of the Chinghis.

This party, however, was advancing in a long ragged line, each aul moving separately. There were few horsemen—only the herdsmen and a few women. All the others, the children, old men and women, rode on pack camels. One might have supposed that these auls had already dispatched their droves to the winter pastures and had left themselves only such horses as they needed. Even the men were mounted on two-year-old camels or oxen. The reason for the lack of horses, however, was quite different: these two clans were poor. Only three of their auls seemed well-to-do, those of Suyundik, Zheksen and Sugir.

Surrounded by a score of djiguits, the elders rode silently, neither jesting nor laughing. Grey men in their old sheepskins and capes, they seemed to have merged with the fog and the autumn sky. Suyundik was gloomy. The people expected him to guide them in decisive action, but this he could not bring himself to do.

"We'll see when we get there. We'll talk to him ourselves. Let him say whether it is the custom or the law to abandon everyone and set off by himself." Thus he evaded the questions of his tribesmen.

Zheksen agreed with him, but the others, young and old, were exasperated. Kumanbai had left the autumn pastures unusually early. Afraid that something was wrong, the other clans, too, had hurriedly clipped their sheep and set off on his trail. The Bokenshi had noticed the Aga-Sultan's lowering glances upon them all the summer. How many times he had sought a pretext to quarrel with them. Thoroughly disturbed, Suyundik had

paid another visit to Bozhei, but the latter could tell him nothing.

When Suyundik had set off to follow Kunanbai, the other clans, too, had grown troubled and soon they were all on the move, both the supporters of the Irgizbai and their adversaries, including Bozhei and Tusip.

The winter quarters of the Bokenshi in the Chinghis were not large. In the centre were Zheksen's quarters, where Kodar had been killed in the spring. As they approached the mountains, the nomads separated, each group heading for its own familiar pastures.

The auls of Suyundik and Zheksen reached the river and proceeded to move along its wooded banks. Crossing the lower spurs of the mountains, they at last reached their destination. There was the field at the foot of Karashoky, and there the peak from which Kodar had been thrown. . . .

But what was this? They could scarcely believe their eyes. The grass in the meadow before the peak had been mown and stacked. A large herd of cows and camels was grazing on Zheksen's land. And nearby stood the yurtas of a prosperous aul. Smoke was lazily rising from the camp-fires, and sheep were bleating in the field.

This winter land was no longer Zheksen's, but had been usurped by another aul.

Higher up, on the slopes, there were horses grazing, nearly all of them brown and bay—Kunanbai's drove.

"Allah has punished us! Dear Suyundik, what shall we do?" Zheksen wailed. The tears stood in his eyes.

"Yes. . . . This is the proverbial disaster: 'Zhailyau in the hands of the enemy, and the winter pasture in flames!'" Suyundik growled and said nothing more.

He had known that Kunanbai was up to something, but that he would take a step such as this had been inconceivable.

"You can be sure that Kunanbai has not only laid hands on Zheksen's land," said Zhetpis furiously. "You'll

see that he has taken all the Bokenshi's winter land! Better death than such dishonour!"

Several of the young djiguits darted forward, lashing their horses. There were shouts from the crowd:

"Where's our land! Our land or their blood!"

"Bokenshi! Are we mongrels? Strangers?"

"This is the price of cowardice!"

"You held us back—and this is the result!"

Suyundik winced. The outcries stung him like whip lashes. What was he to do? If these djiguits were not restrained, they would immediately fall upon Kunanbai's camp. And those who were shouting were not elders, but the ignorant beggars. God knows what they might do in their rage. And who would be to blame? Tomorrow they would all blame Suyundik, saying that he had led them, that he had incited them! The thought filled him with terror.

Suyundik gripped the reins of his horse and shouted:

"Wait, you djiguits! Stay!"

They drew up around him.

"If you intend to fight, then go. But you'll be fighting alone! I shall not be with you! . . . Go, there's the road! Do you think that you can frighten Kunanbai with your twenty soeels? If he had been afraid of you he would not have done what he has done! Where there are twenty of you, there'll be a hundred of them—and if there're a hundred of you, there'll be a thousand of them! Look!" He pointed to the aul.

And sure enough, riders were unhurriedly approaching from the yurtas, from the peak and the nearby hills. They were armed with soeels, which lay in readiness across the saddles of some or under the knees of others, or attached by looped ropes over their arms. There were no less than a hundred of them. They wedged their way through the drove, emerged together and rode towards Suyundik, a neat, compact group.

The Bokenshi became silent.

Now it was Sugir who supported Suyundik. He was the owner of many herds and by far the richest man of the Bokenshi.

"We are not alone," he declared, not too loudly. "We have kinsmen, and finally there are the people. We'll make them restore what is ours! We'll put the matter before the people. But let's not forget ourselves in our anger and do something we shall regret later!"

"Those who pick a quarrel shall pay with their heads," Suyundik added harshly. "Mark this well!"

Kunanbai himself could be seen among the riders. His large bay moved at an even, dignified gait, tossing its mane. As they came near, the Aga-Sultan waved aside his armed riders and, accompanied only by ten elders, approached Suyundik and his djiguits.

Kunanbai regarded them coldly. "What can you do against me?" he seemed to say by his very bearing. His head was thrown back haughtily. All the atkaminer rulers bore themselves in this manner, but in Kunanbai it seemed especially formidable. Suyundik knew that it was merely a gesture. Had he not borne himself in a similar manner to intimidate others? But now, like the others, he was abashed before the authoritative silence of the Irgiz-bai leader.

The Bokenshi were the first to salem. Kunanbai acknowledged their greeting, barely moving his lips. For a moment there was tense silence.

"Mirza,* what riders are those?" Suyundik asked finally (all the elders of the Tobikty addressed Kunanbai as Mirza).

"Those? It is time to brand the horses before turning them out on the winter pastures. That is why they are here," replied Kunanbai.

Their talk broke off suddenly. Zheksen turned—the

* Mirza—master.—Ed.

head of the caravan had already crossed the spur of the mountain and was approaching.

"Mirza, those are our auls approaching. We have come to winter, but our quarters have been occupied by others. What shall we do?" Zheksen addressed himself to Kunanbai.

"And who asked you to come here?" was the curt reply. "What conceit made you start off without asking where to go? Your auls will turn back!" The law rang in his voice.

"But it is said, 'The ruler commands the people, the people command the land!'"

"And so you suppose that the ruler must remove himself to the skies? Where is it said that the Irgizbai have no right to winter in the Chinghis?"

"But why do you have to winter in the Chinghis? Mirza, you have plenty of other good land for wintering," objected Suyundik, hoping to negotiate, but Kunanbai cut him short.

"Eh, Bokenshil" he began as though addressing a general council and presenting his weighty decision before the people. "You are our elder brothers. You grew to manhood earlier than we, and seized the whole of the broad foothills of the Chinghis. The Irgizbai were once small in numbers and younger than you, but you did not give them a scrap of land on the whole of the Chinghis. Now you speak of 'other winter lands.' But what sort of land is it compared with the Chinghis? We are grown men at last, and how long shall we endure it? Shall we long remain disinherited? The Irgizbai too need convenient winter pastures. We have grown and are strong. We are not strangers, but kinsmen of yours. Are we newcomers, that you refuse to give us land to which we have as much right as you?"

Kunanbai's speech sounded like both the plea of a petitioner and the verdict of a judge.

"How much of the winter land do you intend to take from the Bokenshi?" asked Suyundik. He wondered just how great Kunanbai's demands would be.

"The Bokenshi will leave to us all the winter land in this region."

"And where shall we go?" cried Zhetpis, the brother of Zheksen.

There was a tumult of shouts on all sides.

"Are the Bokenshi to be driven away?"

"Shall we wander from here?"

"Is there no one to plead for us?"

Kunanbai silenced them in an instant. His single eye fastened on Suyundik and pointing to the speakers he loudly commanded:

"Quieten them!"

Still intent upon winning Kunanbai's favour, Suyundik turned reproachfully to the djiguits:

"I told you not to start shouting, you foolish chatterers! Keep quiet!"

The shouting ceased.

"Bokenshi," spoke Kunanbai, "do you believe that if your winter land has been taken you will be left without pastures? If I take, I do not do so without making recompense: you shall receive other pastures. I offer you winter land right here, in the Chinghis: Talshoky in the mountains, Karaul at the foothills. Turn about with your auls and go to those places. Such is my decision!"

At that moment riders appeared from two directions. Two of them came from the west, and of these one was the eldest son of Suyundik.

"Our winter land has been occupied by the brothers of the Mirza, by Zhakip and Zhortar. What shall we do?" he asked his father.

A djiguit of Sugir approached from the east.

"Our winter land has been occupied by the uncles of the Mirza, by Mirzatai and Urker. What shall I tell the peo-

ple? We cannot unload, we don't know what to do," he said.

Groups of four and five aul elders deprived of their winter land now approached Suyundik from various sides. They were bitterly angry—they seemed to have brought the indignation and curses of all their kinsmen.

The crowd of Bokenshi continued to grow. But Kunanbai sat on his horse unperturbed. Suyundik realized the hopeless position of his people. He was himself humbled, crushed, trodden underfoot by Kunanbai.

"What's to be done? What can I do? If at least we had been wronged by strangers," he began.

But Zhetpis would not let him speak.

"There's no more justice!" he cried.

The crowd again grew restless.

"There's no one to speak for us!"

"It would be better if they had driven us away altogether instead of humiliating us like this!"

Two other parties of riders appeared from behind a hill. The first, numbering about ten, consisted of the atkaminers of the Kotibak headed by the senior of them, Baisal. Approaching Kunanbai, they saluted and greeted him in a most cordial manner:

"Welcome to your new home, Mirza!"

"May Allah grant you joy in it for many years!"

"May your new home bring you good fortune!"

The second party, which was now approaching, was headed by old Kulinshak, the eldest of the Torgai people. He was accompanied by his five sons, known as "the five dare-devils," brave men and skilful with the spear. Halting before Kunanbai, the old man said:

"I hope you're well, my dear Kunanbai! Let me congratulate you on your new home!"

This opened the eyes of the Bokenshi completely: it was not the Irgizbai alone who were robbing them. Kunanbai's rascally actions were supported by all the elders of the Kotibak, the Torgai and the Topai.

And Suyundik had pinned his hopes on the Kotibaks! "Baisai is firm and straightforward. Surely he will take no part in a robbery," he had thought. When had they conspired? Perhaps they were still concealing something? Who could say! It was clear that Kumanbai had won the support of the elders of the largest clans. This sudden arrival of Baisai and Kulinshak was no accident. They had been ordered to demonstrate their unity before the Bokenshi. Kumanbai had arranged it all.

Suyundik was not the only one who thought this. Zheksen too understood.

"But by all that is holy," he exclaimed bitterly, "this was the winter land of my forefathers! It was here, at the foot of that cliff, that the blood of a son of the Bokenshi was spilt. The land is mine—it has been washed with the blood of my kinsman!"

All were startled by his words.

"It is truly said that grief can derange the mind," Suyundik angrily murmured. "What is the good of recalling such things?"

Kumanbai too was put out by Zheksen's words—he had not expected Kodar to be mentioned. But now he resolved to use Zheksen's thrust to justify the seizure of the land. Ominously he fastened his eye upon Zheksen.

"What is that you're saying? You're probably feeble-minded with old age. A 'hero,' you called him, a 'herd'!* If he were such, then what are you, the Bokenshi? Kodar was not a hero, but a scoundrel whom the souls of the ancestors of the Bokenshi have renounced! He has been renounced by the whole of the Tobikty tribe! And for this I have distributed this land among others—to efface the last traces of that blasphemer, to wipe his memory from the minds of all! Stop this foolish chatter!"

* Kumanbai deliberately distorted Zheksen's words. The latter had called Kodar "erazamat," i.e., male relative, and Kumanbai said merely "er," i.e., brave man, hero.—*Ed.*

His words were like a slap, a slap in the face of all the Bokenshi. Now they understood the real purpose of Kodar's murder: it had served as a pretext to steal their winter pastures.

Even Suyundik could not contain himself.

"Oh, God," he cried, "what do I hear? Oh, wise Bozhei! How shall I forget your words! How truly you spoke when you said, 'It was not on Kodar's neck that you have placed a noose today. By God, you have placed a noose around your own necks!' Oh, Kodar, my lion who died without guilt! Brave, dear Kodar!"

He could say no more, he was choking. He sank forward, clutching at the neck of his horse.

Zheksen suddenly burst into tears.

"The shame rests with me," he sobbed. "May I be damned! I'm a dog, a miserable dog! Oh, my own, my very own Kodar!" Spurring his horse he dashed away, in the direction of the former winter home of Kodar.

His words were like a spark falling on dry grass. All caught up the funeral cry—"Oh, my own, my very own!"—and turned their horses about to follow Zheksen. Suyundik, too, joined the crowd.

Remaining with Baisai and his attendants, Kunanbai felt somewhat annoyed with himself. But nothing in his demeanour revealed that he regretted his words. Silently he watched the Bokenshi ride away, trying to think of the most plausible explanation for this unexpected flare-up.

"D'you know who's incited them?" He turned to Baisai. "Just prod them where it hurts, and out comes all that's hidden in their hearts! They've been incited by Bozhei! By him and no other! He'd like to lay a trap for me among the Tobikty! You're always talking about our 'unity.' Now you can see what it's worth!"

Baisai said nothing.

"But God is just," Kunanbai continued. "Come what may, I shall endure it." And as though emphasizing his trust in Baisai, he concluded, "Tell Suyundik, Sugir and

and Zheksen that they should not distress the people. Let them set the people's minds at rest. Whatever places I may have chosen for the Bokenshi in the Chinghis, I shall see to it that the elders won't suffer. For the three of them I'll do my best. They can take my word!"

One of the riders who had been dispatched by Kunanbai to watch the droves of horses was Maibasars. He was astonished to see the Bokenshi ride by, weeping and voicing the funeral cry.

"Aha, my friends! It's said that a lame sheep bleats only after dark, but the Bokenshi bleat even later! Who ever heard of funeral chants in the autumn for a man who died in the spring?" He laughed maliciously.

In the spring, when all had joined to dishonour Kodar, to renounce his very spirit, Zheksen had allowed no one to approach the corpse; he had driven the weeping women away. "What are you wailing about?" he had jeered. "May your eyes burn in their sockets!" Only two old men, Zhampeis and the herdsman Aitimbet, had not been afraid of him. With the aid of some others as poor as themselves, they had carried the bodies of Kodar and Kamka to the grave of Kutzhan and had there buried them with many tears.

And when the Bokenshi now came riding to the grave, weeping and chanting the funeral cry, they found there four old men, Zhampeis, Aitimbet and two other herdsmen. Unable to visit the grave in summer, they had hastened there upon returning with the caravan, to say their prayers for the dead.

They watched the crowd rushing towards them with astonishment. The Bokenshi dismounted, gasping and sobbing. Among them they could see Suyundik weeping, which was most surprising. But it was even stranger to see that the horsemen were led by Zheksen himself. With a loud wailing the horsemen threw themselves on the graves.

"Forgive us, our protector! Forgive me, my brother!" and the tears streamed down their faces.

But this belated mourning failed to move old Zhempeis, who was bent and withered through the summer of grieving for Kodar and Kamka. And when Zheksen attempted to prostrate himself on Kamka's grave, the old man flung him back:

"May your eyes burn in their sockets! May the eyes of all of you burn, you cursed of Allah!"

Yet the crowd grew rapidly. The men were joined by the women, children and old people, and soon the whole of the Bokenshi kin stood weeping and moaning.

4

The Bokenshi withdrew from the Chinghis, but not to the lands indicated by Kunanbai. Instead, they set up their huts at Kzilshoky, and there they stayed.

The other clans had long gone to their separate winter places and were busy with making hay, drying brushwood for fuel, cleansing the stalls, whitewashing houses and dug-outs, building stoves and doing other urgent jobs.

But not yet knowing where they would spend the winter, the Bokenshi had no such preoccupations.

Kunanbai's messenger had already passed on instructions to Suyundik: let them pick a place about Karaul; they could also have Koldenen and Shalkar for summer pastures.

Suyundik and Zheksen put their heads together: If their two auls could be the first to reach the Karaul winter land and then occupy the two rivers in the summer, they personally would have no cause for complaint. They resolved to act at once and, without a word to their other kinsmen, ordered their auls to gather the camels at dawn, and to dismantle and pack the yurtas. But as they were

about to desert their kinsmen, another group of some twenty or thirty Bokenshi also mounted their horses.

These were the poor of the Bokenshi. They had been roused by Darkembai, a tall and strong old man who had learned by long experience to see through the devices of the elders. He led the group direct to Zheksen's aul.

"Where are you going?" he demanded. "Are you deserting the people?" he shouted. "Don't dare to go without us. Endure the hardships with the rest of us. Put your yurtas back!"

Zheksen could not find the courage to object. Assuming an offended air, he merely asked:

"Now what are you trying to do, my friends?"

"Better mount your horses," Darkembai cut in. "We'll ride to Suyundik and finish our talk there!"

Zheksen and Zhetpis had no alternative but to follow.

The conversation with Suyundik was also brief. Darkembai compelled him to stay.

"Tell me at least what you are hoping for?" Suyundik demanded. "The cold has set in; we are threatened with the winter. Are we going to let the old people and children freeze? How long are we to stay?"

"Lead us, you two: you, Suyundik, and you, Zheksen!" Darkembai answered firmly. "Let us ride to Bozhei. We'll talk to our kinsmen. 'You too will come to grief if you desert us now!' we'll say to them. And if the Zhigitek will not help us, then we'll see!"

Bozhei's camp was reached by noon. He was wintering in the splendid Chinghis pastures inherited from his forefather Kengirbai.

When he saw the elders of the Bokenshi he at once sent for Baidaly and Tusip, in the desire that any view expressed in this affair should be that of all the Zhigitek.

As before, Suyundik was cautious and reserved.

"They have come to you," he said to Bozhei, "because they want your advice. What is your opinion? What would you advise them to do?"

Bozhei tried to read Suyundik's thoughts.

"Cowardly as always," he thought. "Weak-willed as usual and afraid of Kunanbai." He smiled faintly and coldly.

But if Suyundik was timid, the crowd was fairly seething.

"Bozhekeh, we have grovelled before Kunanbai long enough!" Darkembai spoke hotly. "Cowards are always bitten by the dogs and pecked by the hens. We hope that you at least will not urge us to submit! Give us the sort of advice that will at last help our people to stand on their feet, and strike out for themselves!"

This manly talk appealed greatly to Baidaly, who had always respected firmness and daring and had himself always been one for decisive action. He was a living embodiment of the strength and endurance of the Zhigitek.

"Oh, Suyundik," he exclaimed, "you should ask Darkembai for advice. Poor as he is, he speaks like a man!"

Before resorting to force, Bozhei decided that an appeal should be made in the name of justice, the law and custom. If possible, he would open the eyes of the people to Kunanbai's schemes. But first it was necessary to warn the Bokenshi of what awaited them.

"Bokenshi, you are my kinsmen," he began. "He who wrongs you, wrongs me. My happiness, my fortunes, cannot be divided from yours. All that Kunanbai has planned is clear to me. I have heard that he has offered you Talshoky, Karaul and Balpan. Do you know what all this must lead to?"

Bozhei's gaze swept over the crowd.

"He wishes the land of the Zhigitek and the Bokenshi to have a common border. And that usually means an end to agreement and good-neighbourly relations. He hopes that living side by side we, too, shall quarrel over every bush, over every mouthful of water. He wants to sow enmity between us, an enmity which will be passed on from generation to generation. This shall not be! My heart

remains with you, my kinsmen. If you are compelled to settle at Talshoky and Karaul, I'll willingly share with you all I have. That is settled. But first we must try to dispute with them. We're related equally to you and to them. Who should intercede if not we?" Here he looked at Tusip. "We shall try. We'll tell him that the Zhigitek regard his action as unjust. What is to be done afterwards, we shall see. Do you agree?"

His decision was approved by all.

"Then, Tusip, mount your horse. Convey our opinion to Kumanbai and return with his reply today," concluded Bozhei.

"But tell him everything!" Baïdaly added. "Speak your heart without reserve. We've been cowards long enough! Even if there is to be a rupture, convey everything that has been entrusted to you!" Baïdaly was angry and determined. He wanted to encourage, to hearten Tusip.

Kumanbai was resting at Karashoky at the winter home of his eldest wife Kunkeh. Tusip reached the aul at sunset and the Irgizbai leader met him on a small hill nearby. They conferred for a long time, Tusip beginning very cautiously with abstract matters, referring to the necessity for unity and co-ordination, but at last getting to the object of his visit.

"Your action is condemned not only by the Bokenshi, but by the whole of the Zhigitek," he began, but Kumanbai turned and cut in with angry words:

"I can see that the Zhigitek intend to take up the cudgels for the Bokenshi who they claim have been wronged. But why do they forget their neighbours, the Kerei and the Uak people, who have also been wronged? And by whom? By the Zhigitek! You have wronged all who live near. It has been said that you seize the cattle of others, that you refuse to restore the hard-earned wealth of your neighbours. Bozhei, Baïdaly, and you, Tusip, have been blamed for this again and again by all who know you.

First try to justify yourselves, and then speak of the Bokenshi! First restrain your own thieves and plunderers!"

"There are plenty of slanderers everywhere, Kunanbai!" Tusip was furious. "Have Bozhei and Tusip ever been thieves? Perhaps you'll invent something else to bring us grief? But whatever you say, our hands are clean and we are guilty of nothing!"

"And I repeat that you are guilty and dishonoured!"

"If that is so, then prove it now at this sacred hour of sunset!"*

Tusip could barely keep still—he was trembling from head to foot.

"I'll tell you this. Let Bozhei cease laying traps for me! Let him cease throwing darts from behind the backs of others! And if he does not, then let him discharge all his wooden bullets and fire all his guns—he will bear the consequences! He alone will answer!"

Kunanbai concluded peremptorily.

"Tomorrow I shall hold a gathering at your auls; and there we'll hear the complaints of the Kerei and Uak and compel you to return the cattle you have stolen. That's the first thing. And secondly, leave the affairs of the Bokenshi alone! Go your own way. Don't set yourselves up in judgement in such matters. I have not appointed you to do so and have no need for your judgement. Do not interfere unless you desire trouble! And if you do not obey, then I shall understand that you have deliberately meddled in order to oppose me! Now go and convey my words to Bozhei and Baidaly," he finished grimly.

5

At noon on the following day the two messengers of Maibasar, Kamisbai and Zhumagul rode to the Zhigitek and dismounted at the aul of Urkimbai.

* According to Moslem beliefs, at sunset evil spirits roam the earth in search of victims.—*Ed.*

Six yurtas stood nearby, and as the newcomers approached, the dogs barked furiously until driven off with whips and curses. Terrified by the angry guests, the children hid themselves like mice and peeped through the mats curtaining the doors.

Urkimbai was entertaining guests in his large grey yurta—Kaumen and Karasha, close relations of Bozhei. Urkimbai's shock-headed little daughter ran into the tent, and pressing her small figure against her father, whispered:

"Messengers, messengers!"

Even the children knew that messengers were carriers of misfortune. When the two who wore the marks of authority, leather pouches and large brass badges, entered the tent, the little girl hid behind her father.

Urkimbai's greeting was anything but friendly.

"Well, what's all the fuss?"

"Urgent matters! An urgent order! . . . We're in a hurry," explained Kamisbai and sat down in a central position.

Zhumagul stayed by the fire-place, squatted on a knee.

"What order? What trouble are you planning now?" gloomily asked Karasha.

This did not perturb the messenger.

"Here is the order: set up your yurtas. A gathering is to be held in your aul. The people will gather here, also petitioners from the Kerei and the Uak. There will be talks between the tribes and the thieves will be compelled to return the cattle they have stolen."

"Who says so?" snapped Kaumen.

"And who is going to decide the matter?" demanded Karasha.

"And who will answer for the thieving—the thieves, or will everything again be heaped on innocent people?" Urkimbai asked with feeling.

The arrangement of a council always entailed great expense. It would be attended by many—by the petitioners, by those in authority, and by the various visitors

brought by curiosity from other camps. Cattle would have to be slaughtered for an entire month to feed the fat, voracious beys by day and night. This was common knowledge. And it was known too that the ruler always held such councils in auls which had incurred his displeasure.

Kamisbai did not for one moment expect that those who sat here would readily agree to receive the council. They would not dare, of course, to complain to the Aga-Sultan or Maibasars, but they would no doubt try arguing with the messengers. He and Zhumagul, however, had received strict orders from Maibasars: no excuses were to be accepted.

"Such is the will of Kumanbai and Maibasars," he said. "It is not my own idea." Defiantly he looked at Karasha. "Talk it over and make the necessary preparations! Gather all the yurtas together and set them up here! Also consider well which animals are to be slaughtered and how many of them. It is ordered that the Zhigitek supply fifty sheep as a beginning. From what auls are we to take them? Let us discuss it now!"

Kaumen knew it was futile to argue with the messengers. Instead, he turned to Urkimbai and Karasha:

"This affair does not concern us alone: it's a disaster for all the Zhigitek. There'll be no time to speak to Bozhei—he is far from us. But Baidaly lives near. Karasha, take your horse and ride to him. We'll await his answer."

"Good! Go to Baidaly!" Urkimbai approved.

The messengers offered no interference.

Karasha rose quickly and departed. The messengers sat sipping their tea. Urkimbai would not speak—he was too angry.

They had not long to wait. A party of riders soon approached and hurriedly dismounted. It was Karasha returned from Baidaly. But he had not come alone. He was accompanied by ten djiguits, a band known as "the des-

peradoes," men who were not unfriendly with the raiders of the steppes.

Zhumagul, cunning and quick-witted, was not at all pleased to see them.

"What has brought you here," he began, but was interrupted by one of the djiguits.

"It is said that 'when one's father is to be plundered, one should help the plunderers.'" There was a challenge in his words. "We have come to rob the Zhigitek of all their livestock and hand it over to you."

"Why all the livestock? Fifty sheep, we said. But if you have so much, you can bring the animals when the petitioners arrive. Why hurry?" Kamisbai asked with a grin.

"Perhaps we should deliver the animals to you?" Karasha asked, squatting next to him.

"And why not?"

"Ah, you blood-thirsty beast! Have you not caused enough suffering? When will you stop tormenting the people?"

"Enough of such talk! Let me be! Now, what has Baidaly answered?"

"I'll tell you. Here is his answer!" And springing to his feet Karasha brought his heavy whip down on Kamisbai's head.

Before the messenger could pick himself up, Urkimbai shouted to the djiguits in the yurta:

"Whip the life out of the dogs!"

Zhumagul and Kamisbai struggled, cursing furiously, but the djiguits were upon them before they could recover. Both were hurled to the ground, strong knees pinned them down.

"Here's Baidaly's answer! He's ordered that we beat you as long as we have the strength and return you to Maibasars half-dead! There! You've earned this," and kneeling on Kamisbai, Karasha showered him with blows.

Urkimbai and the other djiguits attended to Zhumagul with equal zest.

Badly beaten, their clothes torn to shreds, the two messengers found it as much as they could do to return to Karashoky. Without washing the blood from their faces, they appeared before Kunanbai.

The Aga-Sultan sat in the yurta surrounded by Baisai, Maibasar, the tall and mighty Nadanbai and Manas, sons of Kulinshak, and various djiguits. The tent was full.

After hearing the messengers' story Kunanbai did not speak for some time. Then with a grim expression he turned to Baisai and pointed to the bruised faces of the two men.

"See? This is what comes of being a good kinsman. It was not they who were beaten with Bozhei's whips but I!" Beckoning to the djiguits, he commanded, "Go at once and fetch Urkimbai, who had them beaten in his yurta!"

Ten djiguits leapt to their horses and dashed off. Among them rode the sons of Kulinshak.

Reaching Urkimbai's aul in the twilight, they administered a cruel beating to all the men and dragged the owner from the tent. Urkimbai tried to resist, but soon realized that this might cost him a grave injury. White with rage, he gritted his teeth, determined to endure in silence. His hands firmly bound behind his back, he was seated on a saddle before Nadanbai, and with angry shouts the entire band then set off at a gallop towards Karashoky.

The darkness deepened as the djiguits raced along the bank of a river. Soon they emerged from the winter pasture of Urkimbai in the heart of the Chinghis, struck the road on the ridge, crossed the stream and turned west, to Karashoky.

An aspen grove lay in their path, and suddenly a body of armed riders burst out into the open with wild shouts.

"Here they go! On to them!"

"Pull them down! Down with them!"

"Beat them! Flay the dogs!"

Forty men descended upon the djiguits of Kunanbai with fiendish yells. Shokpars and soeels whistled on all sides.

The attackers were led by Karasha. Hours before, Baidaly had warned him, "You have taken a bold step—now see that you are not caught unawares! Watch out!" Karasha had then mounted and kept a sharp look-out over the mountains until at dusk he had observed the horsemen approaching the aul of Urkimbai and at once guessed their intentions. In his own aul he had gathered five djiguits. On his way back he was joined by Kaumen's djiguits. They were too late to intercept their enemy at the aul itself and ambushed them in a convenient spot.

Karasha was a skilful soeel fighter and the djiguits of his aul were as good as any in a battle.

The men of Kunanbai were headed by Manas, one of the five "dare-devil" sons of Kulinshak. The onslaught did not take him by surprise and he did not lose his head when the formidable company burst upon him from the wood. He snatched his shokpar from under the knee.

"Steady!" he shouted. "What if they are many? Hit out boldly!"

The two parties madly hurled themselves upon one another. Manas at once unsaddled two Zhigiteks, but Karasha fell upon him so swiftly that he had to turn to defend himself. Bound fast, Urkimbai perceived Karasha in the mêlée and shouted:

"I'm here! Karasha, set me free!"

Karasha wheeled and flung himself upon the horse bearing the two riders. But this was one of Kunanbai's chestnut pacers, and it seemed impossible to overtake him. Nevertheless, Karasha hung on. Having separated Nadanbai and his prisoner from the others, he pursued them hotly until Nadanbai was compelled to turn in his saddle for defence. Urkimbai promptly used the opportunity to slip to the ground, and was at once set on his feet by his friends.

The echoes of voices and hoofs reverberated through the mountains and swiftly brought more yelling riders to the scene.

"Flee! Fight them off as you go! Follow me!" Manas shouted when he saw that the Zhigitek had freed their kinsman.

Away they dashed through one of the passes amid the rocks and soon vanished in the dark.

Both events—the beating given to Maibasar's messengers and the fight for Urkimbai—encouraged the Zhigitek and strengthened their confidence.

6

The following day brought a change in the weather, the first icy breath of winter.

Usually a friendly wind blew from the ridges of the Chinghis. In the spring it carried away the snow, cleared the passes and the groves. In the winter, too, it was the helpmate of the herdsmen. It swept the snow from the pastures and was rarely very cold, as it usually blew from the south. It could be dangerous, of course, for there were times when it hurled great rocks from the heights, uprooted anything that grew tall, and spared only the low shrubs and feather-grass, the best winter fodder for the sheep.

It was in the autumn that the Chinghis wind became an enemy. Its fierce gusts were hard to endure, and it brought on the frosts and draped the skies with leaden clouds.

On this day the wind brought the snow-flakes, the first of the year.

The auls in the passes and valleys had already taken to winter quarters. Though many still lived in their yurtas, a sharp watch had been kept on the weather and this first day of cold compelled all to strike camp and carry

their things to warmer shelters. There was such activity in Kunanbai's aul at Karashoky that one might have supposed that preparations were being made for a funeral feast.

When the djiguits of Maibasars returned empty-handed after losing their prisoner, Kunanbai sent his heralds in all directions. The elders who had come to visit him with Baisals were detained, and were soon joined by other men of the Irgizbai. Wherever the heralds appeared, men quickly mounted their horses. They continued to stream towards Kunanbai's aul from all sides.

Ten djiguits headed by Maibasars were sent to the Bokenshi, who had not yet moved from Kzilshoky.

The djiguits brought them strict orders from their chief, which compelled them to move at last. Suyundik and Sugir had long been ready for this and only awaited the signal. They were the first to depart and the others had to follow.

But the Bokenshi were not the only ones who set off that day. Several of Kunanbai's auls were also on the move. Earlier the Aga-Sultan, who desired to keep them all within reach, had not allowed them to wander. With the advent of the cold, however, he could not keep his old mother, Ulzhan, and the children freezing.

"It is getting cold. Let us go to the winter place," the children had pleaded with Ulzhan and old Zereh, who in turn had constantly plagued Kunanbai. At last he was compelled to give in.

Having dispatched their aul, Kunanbai hurried to take advantage of the general disorder that prevailed in the Chinghis during the wandering.

The horsemen summoned by the heralds had been gathering from early morning. By noon they were many—a great fighting force armed with soeels, spears and shokpars, and ready for action.

In addition to the Irgizbai, there were men from other clans—among them the Kotibak people headed by

Baisai. Their winter quarters adjoined those of Kunanbai.

At noon, Kunanbai, properly arrayed and accompanied by Baisai and Maibasari, emerged before the crowd.

"Mount," he commanded.

All sprang into their saddles. The Irgizbai were the first to seize their weapons.

The wind grew stronger and howled over the peaks. It was beginning to freeze, the snow-flakes clung to faces and blanketed the earth. The mountains grew dim and an icy fog crawled over the ridges, covering everything with hoarfrost.

Kunanbai mounted his grey bay and surveyed the scene. The furrows on his brow grew deeper and his one eye reddened ferociously.

Briefly he gave the order to Baisai and Maibasari: "Forward!"

The frozen ground rang with the thunder of many hoofs as the great mass moved towards Tokpambet, the winter quarters of Bozhei. Kunanbai and his party rode in the vanguard. Soon they were moving at a fast trot.

The sun was still high when Kunanbai and his force reached the projection which lay not far from Bozhei's winter quarters.

At Tokpambet final preparations were being made for the winter. The chimneys gave forth the dense yellow smoke of sheep's tallow, and many people were busy outside the huts. There were horses tethered to the walls, but not many, as Kunanbai noticed at once. The remaining horses were saddled but hobbled, grazing in the rich pastures.

When they saw the enormous body of riders coming, the people by the huts sprang into motion. There was a general rush for the horses, soeels and spears flashing everywhere. The Zhigitek seemed to be ready for a desperate fight. Within a moment they would all be mounted.

Kunanbai realized this immediately and was prompt to act.

"Olzhai! Olzhai!"* he shouted, lashing his bay.

The entire force thundered forward behind him with the cries: "Irgizbai! Irgizbai!" "Topai! Torgai!" They fanned out over the slopes like swift-spreading flames in the steppes. Their howls and battle-cries and the clatter of hoofs reverberated in the hills and valleys.

Bozhei's men were fewer than those of Kunanbai. The Zhigitek, moreover, had failed to rally—they had been caught unawares. According to custom, the opponent should have made known his intentions, indicated the field of battle and only then sent his horsemen into attack. Kunanbai had done nothing of the sort. He had struck without warning.

Bozhei was surrounded only by those who dwelt in the neighbourhood. It was impossible to warn the auls in the foothills and the Zhigitek on the banks of the river. In the mountains most of the Zhigitek were busy preparing to move to winter homes.

Among those gathered about Bozhei were ten who had been brought by Darkembai. In the morning his suspicions had been aroused by the lines of armed men moving towards Karashoky from the various winter places of the Irgizbai. "Kunanbai is probably gathering his kinsmen to fall upon Bozhei and all the Zhigitek," he thought. Long before noon he had given warning to Bozhei and other kinsmen. On his way he had visited Baidaly, Karasha, Kaumen and Urkimbai and all these had followed him with their sons.

Altogether some forty men had gathered to defend their leader. Among them were the valiant sons of Kaumen and Karasha and other young djiguits well armed and ready to fight for their people. At first they had want-

* Olzhai—the name of an Irgizbai ancestor and the battle-cry of the clan.—*Ed.*

ed to throw themselves on the horses grazing nearby, raise their battle-cry: "Kengirbai! Kengirbai!" and to meet the enemy with soeels and shokpars in hand. But Baidaly restrained them.

"Stay! . . . Would you leave Bozhei unprotected? If we die, then let us die together!"

Kunanbai's force was rapidly drawing near. His djiguits came rushing on with Kunanbai at their head, merciless in his intent.

Bozhei was distraught. "What grief has come upon us! He has caught us unawares! Again disaster descends without warning!" he repeated in despair.

His only hope lay with those of the djiguits who had managed to mount. With soeels in hand, they would strike at Kunanbai's flanks in small groups of five and ten. But there were so few of them! The others were still running about the fields catching their horses. Would the enemy strike them down without so much as letting them mount?

Kunanbai dashed on. Without checking his pace, he dispatched two hundred to strike at his opponents from both sides. As his howling horde reached the grazing horses these darted in all directions, soeels smashing wooden saddles to pieces.

A ragged row of the Zhigitek attempted to face Kunanbai on foot, but were overwhelmed by the avalanche of Irgizbai, whose forces were not even visibly diminished by the two hundred that had been diverted. The Zhigitek horsemen who struck at Kunanbai's flank were quickly felled. Nothing could have been easier, the odds being forty and fifty to one!

Those who could not reach their horses in the pastures also tried to fight on foot. But what is a man on foot against an armed horseman? Short shrift was made of them; a single, well-directed blow sufficed to strike each of them down. A similar fate overtook all who had strayed

from the huts. The attackers knew their superiority and their battle-cry rose louder.

"Olzhai! Olzhai! Irgizbai! Irgizbai! Topai! Torgai!" They were calling to the spirit of Olzhai and other ancestors to strike greater terror into the hearts of their enemies.

All resistance smashed, the conquerors descended in a solid body upon the houses. The howling of the riders, the clash of their soeels and clatter of the hoofs merged into a general uproar.

Bozhei's small force had not moved from the spot. All raised their shokpars and soeels, a bristling knot of fighters who would not give way. They were hemmed in on all sides.

"Fall back to the houses! Hold the doors! Keep them out! We'll fight to the end!" Baidaly shouted and led the way to the yurtas.

Baidaly and Bozhei took a stand within the main entrance, surrounded by the strongest and bravest of their djiguits, who were headed by the two sons of Kaumen.

But the numbers of the enemy were overwhelming. The Irgizbai horses pranced at the very door, their riders awaiting orders.

Kunanbai, still on horseback, was in the midst of his men.

It was at this moment that Darkembai forced a way between Bozhei and Baidaly and began to take aim from an old flint-lock resting on a support. Where he had found the weapon, it would have been hard to say. The gun was loaded, however, and only needed to be ignited. Breathless, Darkembai called to Bozhei:

"That one-eyed devil has no heart! He's come to jeer at us again, but this will lay him flat! Step aside!" He fumbled with a flint trying to strike a spark.

Bozhei caught his hand.

"Don't! It's not for us to mete out punishment to him. The spirits of our ancestors will smite him!"

Kunanbai's voice now rose above the din:

"Drag them from their lair. Tie them up like slaves and pull them out!"

Headed by Maibasars, the crowd rushed to the door. Kunanbai urged them on as he saw their hesitation.

"Dismount and break down the door! All together!"

Darkembai and those who surrounded Baidaly and Bozhei fought desperately, but the odds were too great. The Irgizbai burst into the house.

Beneath the low ceiling the defenders were unable even to swing their soeels. Within a few minutes they were overcome, disarmed and dragged into the open.

No sooner did Karasha, Urkimbai and the young djiguits emerge than they were struck again by many fists. Blood-stained and battered, they continued to resist, cursing Kunanbai in the foulest language, but their words were lost in the general turmoil.

"Give them a taste of the whip!" Maibasars roared, his eyes blazing fiercely. "Don't spare them! Let them know with whom they have picked a quarrel!"

His djiguits, headed by the two messengers, Kamisbai and Zhumagul, lashed away without mercy.

Kunanbai showed no interest in this scene—he was sharply scrutinizing every man dragged out of the house, looking for the one for whom he was nursing his wrath. That one was Bozhei.

At last Bozhei appeared, not at all in the same condition as the others. No one had dared lay hands upon him. His fox-fur hat had not been disarranged and his garments were not disordered or torn. He was not dragged out, but walked alone, the Irgizbai merely accompanying him, moving in a close circle around him.

Kunanbai lashed his horse and came close. Baisai too urged his horse nearer.

"The whip!" was Kunanbai's order to Maibasars.

Zhumagul and Kamisbai hurled themselves on Bozhei and threw him to the ground.

"Give him the whip! Strip and flay him!" raged Kunanbai.

"May your last eye burn in its socket! Ah, Kunanbai, you'll be damned by the spirits of your forefathers," cried Bozhei in fury.

But his cape and fur coat were torn from him, and Kamisbai swung his whip. Bozhei's back was bared, his white body lay under the very hoofs of Kunanbai's bay. A silence stole over the crowd, and no one stirred.

Kamisbai's whip swung in the air, but suddenly a man broke through the crowd and, flinging himself upon Bozhei, covered him with his body.

This was Pusharbai of the Kotibak, contemporary and friend of Bozhei.

"Enough, enough, Kunanbai! Arasha!... Arasha!"* he cried.

"Give him the whip too! Hit the dog!" Kunanbai was twirling his whip in a fury.

"Only dare!" A strong and commanding voice rang out, the voice of Baisal. Kunanbai turned sharply and looked him full in the face. The change that had come over Baisal's features augured much, but Kunanbai was unyielding.

"Strike away! Lash the two of them!" he ordered.

Maibasara giving the lead, the Irgizbai responded to the command. A shower of blows rained down on Bozhei and Pusharbai.

Baisal's horse was spurred into sudden action, and his master stooped quickly and flung Maibasara aside.

"Kotibak! Follow me, all Kotibak!" It was the tribal cry, and a swift movement ran through the Kotibak. In a great mass they separated from Kunanbai and went over to the Zhigitek.

Overwhelmed and helpless, the latter could not have been of much use to Baisal, but the fight was not resumed.

* Arasha—I intercede. A man who pronounced this word took the blame of the other upon himself.—*Ed.*

It was evident that Baisal had been deeply hurt by the treatment meted out to Bozhei, to Pusharbai and his entire people, and in his anger and bitterness he had suddenly gone over to the Zhigitek.

This was plain to the djiguits and the messengers of Maibasar, and they were afraid to go on with the beating. Instead they withdrew and let Bozhei rise.

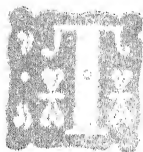
"Eh, Kunanbai!" Bozhei shouted furiously after the departing leader. "I saved you from a bullet today, and you cast me into the flames! I won't let you forget this day!"

Kunanbai gathered all who were left to him after the desertion of the Kotibak and, still surrounded by a formidable force, retired to Karashoky.



The Departure

I



HE SUN had just set, and the night's thickening shadows were creeping from all corners of the room, rising to the ceiling in a dark indistinct cloud.

The house of Ulzhan, in which Abai lived with his grandmother and mother, was the largest in the Zhidebai winter settlement. Spacious and welcoming, it was decorated with rugs, draperies and alasha.*

The lamp had not yet been lit. Most of the tenants were engaged in various tasks in the open, and the great room seemed all the greater for its stillness.

Abai was kneeling before the window overlooking the Chinghis ridges, his elbows resting on the sill, his chin on his palms. On his right, Zereh sat on a low couch and with her knee gently rocked the cradle of her granddaughter Kamshat, the daughter of Aigiz. As so often before, the old woman was crooning a lullaby. It was an old song, older even than she, the only one who sang it now, and to Abai it seemed as warm and as dear as

*Alasha—a woollen bedspread ornamented with bright patterns.—*Ed.*

Grandmother herself: once, long ago, he too had been lulled to sleep by this melody. And nothing had changed in it since—not a word: a good song is as true as a mother's heart and knows no changes. It was a song as serene as the quiet breath of night, and Grandmother's gentle voice only heightened the stillness of the sunset hour. As Abai listened he felt that old Zereh's singing, so warm and yet melancholy, was lulling him too. He would have liked it to go on for a long, long time, for ever.

Since the day of their arrival, Abai had spent his evenings with his grandmother. He could not have said just why he was so drawn to her. At dusk when the flocks were returning from the pastures, he would go to the house of his younger mother Aigiz and pick up his little sister Kamshat. Then he would take her to their grandmother's and caress her and play with her.

But that evening Kamshat would not fall asleep. At every pause in the song she opened her big, black-currant eyes and made little sucking noises, her long lashes blinking as though demanding that the song continue.

Abai generally spent the evening hour in solitude. If he were outdoors at the time he liked to climb a nearby hill. He found the evening steppes pervaded with a mysterious, compelling force which strangely affected his thoughts.

And now as he listened to the soothing song, his eyes wandered over the mountains, over the tortuous skylines of the Chinghis, to the haze of the farthestmost, barely visible, peaks.

The mountains were about fifteen miles from Zhidebai, but they seemed to recede into the gathering gloom. Blue and ominous, the cold outlines of the great ridges looked like giants turned to stone. Immobile and silent, they slowly cloaked themselves in darkness.

What was happening in the mountains? News had not yet reached the aul about the onslaught upon the Zhigitek, but word had come that the Bokenshi had been driven from Karashoky, that they had left their old winter home with bitter tears. Everyone knew that some terrible calamity had descended upon the winding Chinghis Range, and Abai sensed that too.

The cold wind from the mountains was like a breath of the cruel life raging there. But the icy gusts seemed to melt away in the warmth of the grandmother's song. What enormous strength lay hidden in a song!

Startled by the idea, Abai turned his eyes skywards.

A full moon floated there, now touching upon a solitary dark cloud, now hiding behind it and peeping mischievously through. Fascinated, Abai forgot his thoughts.

The moon dived into another cloud below, popped out for an instant and dived again. It seemed to be playing hide-and-seek: one minute it would disappear completely and then, bright and smiling, it would emerge suddenly from behind a dark curtain, only to vanish again in a second. Now it seemed to be winking as though teasing someone, now it floated serenely, a silver disc, and then once more it plunged into the mists. What a frolicsome moon! And when it chose to peep out glittering for an instant, he smiled, fancying that it was playing like a child.

It was such fun to watch, Abai could have gazed at it for hours. But suddenly there was noise outside, and he heard someone running up to the door. In came Ospan. He must have been teasing someone and as always had taken to his heels. He ran in laughing boisterously, followed by the weeping, whimpering Smagul, the son of Abai's younger mother, Aigiz, a boy of Ospan's age.

Obviously Ospan had upset Smagul somehow. Abai sprang up and seized Ospan. At last Smagul had caught

up with him! But Ospan knew he was at home, and he impatiently faced the intruder.

"What d'you want?" he yelled, catching Smagul by the collar.

Abai separated them.

"What has he done?" he asked Smagul.

"He's taken my knucklebone!" and he wailed still louder.

"Have I? You cry-baby," Ospan teased. "He's taken my knucklebone," he mimicked his brother.

"Give it back," said Abai severely.

But Ospan was determined to resist by fair means or foul.

"He's a liar. He didn't have any knucklebone!"

Abai tried to search him; but Ospan wrenched himself free, fled to the stove and with his hands behind his back defiantly wedged himself into a corner. A pail of kumys stood near and he decided that this would be handy if Abai were to attempt to recover the toy. If the worst came to the worst, he could upset the pail and then Abai too would be in a fix. But Abai divined the stratagem and did not go for him.

"Show me your hands," he said, unexpectedly clutching Ospan by the ear.

Ospan roared, and kicked at the pail. Abai stopped him from upsetting it, but the lid was knocked off. Twisting madly, Ospan threw the knucklebone into the kumys.

"Oi-bail See! There's nothing in my hands!" he said, whining.

Abai had not seen the knucklebone fly into the milk, but Smagul had been watching his tormentor closely. He dashed to the pail, rolled up his sleeve and lowered his dirty hand into the kumys. The sleeve fell and also went into the liquid, but Smagul zealously went on fishing. Angry with him now, Abai let go of Ospan so that he could pull Smagul away.

Like a small hawk Ospan pounced on his little half-brother, punched him in the back several times and gleefully pushed his head into the pail. Poor Smagul did not manage to retrieve his treasure. His mouth and nose were full of mare's milk and choking and spluttering he extricated himself.

"You thief," he shouted at Ospan, throwing in a string of sordid curses for emphasis.

Abai was horrified.

"Fool! Who taught you such words, you pig?" He boxed the boy's ears.

Ospan, the instigator, also came in for some rough treatment. Both youngsters started to howl and rushed off in different directions, Ospan to throw himself at his grandmother's feet, and Smagul to his mother.

For a long time Abai stood rooted to the spot, paralyzed by Smagul's words. He could hear Smagul whining again—but now it was intermingled with the angry cries of Aigiz accompanying her son.

The door of the Great Yurta flew open. Aigiz pushed her boy into the room and almost before she had crossed the threshold screamed:

"There he is! Claw at him to your heart's content! Tear him to pieces! Eat him alive!" She came close to Abai.

"Kshi-apa,"* he began quietly.

But Aigiz cut him short. Words tumbled from her lips in an endless torrent.

"That's right, take advantage of the fact that you're stronger than he! There are many of you, four from one mother!"

"Kshi-apa, please listen. . . . If you had only heard the words he used!"

* Kshi-apa—younger mamma, the form of addressing the younger wives of the father.—*Ed.*

"Why should I hear them? You've grown and want to show your fangs? You struck Smagul because he's the son of your mother's rival!"

"God above, what are you saying?"

"You're fond of beating those who are younger and weaker, aren't you? Wait until tomorrow! Khalel will show you a thing or two!" She was threatening Abai with the name of her eldest son who had been away at school in the town.

It looked as though the two auls were preparing for a fray.

"Is that really all that you, our mother, can say to us?"

"Hold your tongue! Enough of that! You're the seniors, and we—tokal.* It's our lot to be humbled and beaten, isn't it?"

Abai was abashed by the open coarseness of his young mother. He turned pale, and trembling with indignation resolved neither to beg her pardon nor to yield.

"Stop this! What sort of a person are you?" he cried angrily and turned to the window, unable to say more.

The deaf Zereh had not been able to hear the whole of the quarrel, but she guessed its meaning by the woman's gestures. She also noticed that Abai was upset. She left Kamshat and rose indignantly.

"Get out of here, out of my sight!" she shouted, approaching her daughter-in-law. "What are you babbling about? Sowing discord among the children, are you? Get out before you come to some harm!"

Aigiz retreated before the old woman, but continued her insolent complaints.

"You're against me because I am tokal. You've all banded together to humiliate me. But we'll see! Wait till he himself comes tomorrow!"

She was referring to Kunanbai. Aigiz was her husband's favourite and she could depend on him. Nonethe-

* Tokal—younger wife.—*Ed.*

less, she tried to speak only loudly enough for Abai to hear, not Zereh.

A quiet voice suddenly spoke behind her. It was Ulzhan. She had entered long before, and had been listening silently to Aigiz's shouts.

"Stop it, for the love of God. Enough! Think of the children. . . . I've been shielding them from this and you don't seem to care at all," she said.

"Do you expect me to keep quiet always—to endure everything in silence?"

"Please stop it. Go! I shall never remind you of the things you've said here—but please go away and keep your anger to yourself." Ulzhan's voice was as calm as ever.

Glaring at her, Aigiz took her son by the hand and departed. Ulzhan watched her go, then sighed and removed her coat. Reaching for the flint, she struck a spark and lit the lamp. In the light of the thin reddish flame, almost lost in the big room, she could see the unhappy, flushed face of Abai.

"Abai-zhan, what's the matter with you, my son?"

"Apa! Why does kshi-apa quarrel so often?" he asked.

This question was the question of an adult. Ulzhan preferred to conceal her thoughts from the other children; but she could not bring herself to hide anything from Abai. He could be trusted with her secrets.

"My dear," she said. "Rivals will remain rivals. We spend our lives licking our wounds. How can you know what I feel?"

Deep in his heart Abai understood her, but he could not express it in words.

Somebody laughed at the door. The newcomers were Takezhan, Abai's elder brother, and the Mullah Gabitkhan. Youthful cheer seemed to enter with them.

Takezhan was nearly sixteen. An ingenious lad, a great lover of jokes and witty sayings, he had somehow gained the friendship of Gabitkhan, whom he treated as an equal

despite the difference in their years. Following the mul-lah, he laughingly teased him for his curious pronunciation.

Gabitzhan was a Tartar. To evade a military levy some years back, he had fled to Karkaralinsk, where he had been received by the clan of Bertis and had found himself in the aul of a distant branch of the Irgizbai. Though young, he was known to be erudite; at a ceremony to commemorate the death of Kunanbai's father, he had been invited to stay with the Irgizbai chief.

Gabitzhan still distorted the Kazakh language in a very amusing way, but his simplicity, gentleness and erudition won all hearts. Both young and old regarded him as a friend, and only Takezhan made fun of him.

During the past few evenings Gabitzhan had been relating the stories from *The Arabian Nights* in the home of the mothers. After tea, at Ulzhan's request, he began the thrilling story of the three blind men. The tale, however, was interrupted by the arrival of a horseman, whom they saw dash past the window.

"Now who can that be?"

"He's certainly in a hurry!"

The messenger Zhumagul entered the room.

Exchanging brief greetings, he launched on a detailed description of the fight that had taken place the day before at Tokpambet, the bruises on his left cheek providing evidence of his part in it. Speaking loudly for Zereh to hear, he told the tale of Bozhei's beating with great relish, making no attempt to conceal his pleasure.

When Zereh had heard the story, she turned quickly to Zhumagul and made him tell it again. Then, assured that she had heard correctly, she said with asperity:

"Bozhei's the last of the wise elders in our tribe. You've lost your conscience altogether! And you, windbag, why are you yelping about such things in the presence of the children?"

Perhaps because all of them knew Bozhei as a respected man of honour, or else because the old mother's authority had its usual effect, they lapsed into an embarrassed silence. Only Takezhan approved his father's action.

"Let them know that we're not to be trifled with! He got what he deserved!"

Ulzhan looked at him coldly.

"You'd better hold your tongue! What's been done to him is bad enough," she said.

Satai, an old herdsman, had arrived with Zhumagul. At first he sat listening quietly, but then he too engaged in the conversation, telling the company how at noon that day he had been out in the pastures and had seen Bozhei, Baidaly and others—about ten men in all—dismount at the grave of Kengirbai. They had stood on the hill for a long time, he said, and one of the djiguits had told Satai, "Bozhei and his kinsmen are riding to Karkaralinsk to complain about Kunanbai. They have just paused on the way to offer a prayer at the grave of their forefather."

This reminded Zhumagul of the purpose of his sudden visit: Kunanbai had sent him to fetch Abai. Kunanbai too was going to ride to Karkaralinsk tomorrow and desired to be accompanied by his son.

A deep silence ensued. Everyone was puzzled at the news.

On the following day the entire family turned out to see Abai depart on his long journey. Zhumagul stood ready, holding a cream-coloured horse by the rein. On its back was a rich-looking silver-studded saddle.

Abai went up to Zereh first.

"Good-bye, Grandma," he said, taking her small withered hand into both of his.

Zereh pressed her face to his brow.

"May God keep you. A happy journey, Abai, my heart!"

From the others Abai took leave more formally, saying merely, "Khosh, Khosh!"

Ulzhan stood by his horse, having taken the rein from Zhumagul.

"Come to me," she called her son. "Pismilda,"* she said and with this blessing helped him into the saddle.

Abai gathered the folds of his cloak and was about to set off when Ulzhan placed her long, handsome fingers on the animal's mane. Realizing that she wished to say something more, Abai looked at her questioningly.

"My son," she said, "the older people often turn from peace to strife. It is said that 'with rivals, even the flakes of their ashes are enemies.' But you must keep out of this. When you see Bozheken,** hold him in honour and convey our salem. We have always respected him as a kinsman. Who is right or wrong is not a matter for you to decide. Leave to your father his enmities, but you must be just."

Abai spurred his horse. Again and again he turned to look back—his people still stood watching. The words of his mother sang in his ears. And Bozhei was near and dear to him, a man who claimed his sympathy as none other.

2

Abai and his father had long arrived in Karkaralinsk, and the earth lay already whitened by the winter.

Kunanbai had taken up his abode in the centre of the little town, in a spacious wooden house with a green iron roof. It was the house of a hospitable Tartar trader fond of the company of Kazakhs.

The Aga-Sultan had come to town attended by numerous kinsmen and nokers.*** The surrounding houses were

* Pismilda, a distortion of "bismyllya," "in God's name," a blessing for a journey.—*Ed.*

** Bozheken—the respectful form of Bozhei.—*Ed.*

*** Nokers—members of someone's suite, bodyguards, servants.—*Ed.*

taken up by his brothers, Maibasars and Zhakip, and other kinsmen with their various hangers-on and servants. The quarters of Kunanbai and Maibasars were crowded with interpreters and officials by night and day. Besides Maibasars's messengers, Kamisbai and Zhumagul, the houses accommodated Kunanbai's personal messenger, Karabas, and a number of djiguits who had accompanied the suite as an emergency precaution. The thirty nokers were put up in eight other houses.

Kunanbai's party contrasted curiously with the permanent residents of the town. The Irgizbai leader was always surrounded by a crowd of people from many different tribes. Among them was the Tartar Mullah Gabitkhan, the Kirghiz Izgutti, the Arab theologian Berdikhozha, and even Circassians who served as bodyguards.

The heart of the town began to resemble a Tobikty aul, and when Abai grew bored at his father's, he would ramble from house to house for diversion.

After morning tea on this sunny day, he decided to go to Maibasars's residence. The surrounding hills were capped with snow and sunk in the slumber of the cold season. The slender pines on the outskirts of the town were deep in snow-drifts, and the mountains were like old men in hats of furry white.

The day was cold, though the northern wind barely breathed. As he pulled his fox-fur hat more snugly over his ears, Abai thought of his grandmother's advice, never to forget to fasten his hat well. "There's nothing worse than being deaf," she had warned him. "You see the trouble I have." He wondered how she was. "Probably worries about me in every snowstorm and on every cold day," he thought. Vividly he recalled all his loved ones at Zhi-debai. He was homesick.

The frozen surface of the snow crunched underfoot, and now and again Abai's narrow-toed new boots slipped on the icy road. He no longer looked like a boy—he was dressed as befitted a young man. On his head was a hat

of fox-fur and black velvet. The older folk wore hats made from fox-paws and, to distinguish themselves, the youths of the Tobikty had lately begun to wear hats made from the pelt of the fox. As was customary, Abai wore a squirrel coat beneath a broad cloak of black velvet shot with silver grey. The sleeves were not very long. Cloaks with wide armholes and long sleeves were worn only by the Karkaralinsk Kazakhs. The cut of their collars, too, differed from that of the Tobikty, and their fur hats were made not of six but of four sections. The young people of the Tobikty were girdled not with leather belts but with scarfs of blue cloth.

On his way Abai met many of the aul Kazakhs. Most of them were on horseback and heading for the house of Kunanbai. They were the atkaminers who had come with various petitions and the plaintiffs who would sit about the Aga-Sultan's house from morn till night.

At last Abai reached Maibasar's house.

In the courtyard there was a great gathering in a large open shed. There were no strangers here, only kinsmen and acquaintances—mostly elderly men. Among them stood Maibasar, large and ruddy, with a white lambskin thrown over his shoulders. Here gathered all the Tobikty who lived apart from Kunanbai.

Four young djiguits were trying to overthrow a fawn four-year-old mare with prominent withers. From the first day of Kunanbai's stay in Karkaralinsk, Maibasar had been gathering—as presents to the Irgizbai leader—fat sheep and foals, and other choice meat. One of the fattened horses was now to be slaughtered for a feast of the friends.

All the way to Karkaralinsk and in the town itself all the Irgizbai had met with a warm welcome and generous hospitality; and those who had gathered were therefore grateful to Kunanbai who had won such esteem for them. Seeing the fat fawn mare they felt even greater gratitude.

"This journey of the Mirza has been especially successful," began Zhakip, the brother of Kunanbai.

Following the example of the numerous petitioners and plaintiffs who had arrived in Karkaralinsk, all the Tobikty spoke of Kunanbai as "Mirza."

"Our enemies are green with envy. When the mosque opens tomorrow, the people will sing the praises of the Mirza," said Maibasar importantly.

"And with good reason too! The mosque is splendid!"

"Karkaralinsk has never seen the like," the others chimed in delightedly.

Abai had heard a good deal about this mosque from the townsfolk as well as from his father. The foundations had been laid the previous year and the building had been erected at Kunanbai's expense, which had earned him universal esteem and veneration. Today this first and only mosque in Karkaralinsk was to be consecrated and the mullahs in the town and the prominent elders of the auls could not praise Kunanbai highly enough for this house of Allah.

Two days before, Kunanbai had received none other than the Imam himself, the Mullah Khasen Saratau, who was favourably disposed towards the Kazakhs.

"From the plain people you have risen to be a khan," the Imam had said. "In the Koran the mosque is termed 'the dwelling of Allah.' You have erected a home of the Almighty among this ignorant, unenlightened people. You shall find favour in the eyes of the Lord of the Creation!"

Hereupon he had bestowed his blessing on Kunanbai in the sight of the full assembly of atkaminers. For such marks of distinction the Imam, before he left, was duly rewarded with a mount and camel by the Aga-Sultan.

Abai could plainly see that his father was more powerful and influential than any of the atkaminers. Curious, he watched and tried to understand how this had come about. But the longer he lived with his father and ob-

served his actions, the more enigmatic his father seemed to him.

When the meat of the slaughtered mare had been removed to the kitchen, the Tobikty of the other houses, too, came to dine with the head of the volost, and the courtyard grew crowded. Maibasars was already leading his kinsmen into the house, and the guests were ready to take places, when the outer gate was flung open by Karabas, the messenger of Kunanbai.

He seemed in a great hurry.

"Alsheken* will soon be here! They say that Alsheken is on his way," he told Maibasars and Zhakip. "The Mirza calls—hurry!"

Maibasars quickly donned his sheepskin, and Zhakip moved to follow. Abai wished to stay, but Maibasars urged:

"Abai you must come with us! He's your future father-in-law and you must give him your salem!" He smiled ironically.

Kunanbai's friendship with Alshinbai had been sealed two years before when the Aga-Sultan had demanded the hand of Dilda, Alshinbai's granddaughter, in marriage for Abai. Alshinbai had thus become Abai's prospective grandfather-in-law.

During his stay in Karkaralinsk Kunanbai had already been visited several times by Alshinbai, who was greatly esteemed by the elders of the region. Abai had always heard him referred to as "Alsheken" and never merely "Alshinbai." His clan bore the name of Karakok.** Alshinbai was the son of the illustrious Tlenshi-bey, the grandson of Kazibek-bey. Abai's betrothed Dilda, therefore, had sprung from an ancient and honourable line, and the kalim demanded for such a bride was enormous. Entire droves of horses and camels had already

* Alsheken—the respectful form of Alshinbai.—*Ed.*

** Karakok—winner of the races, a title of honour.—*Ed.*

passed from the aul of Kunanbai to that of Alshinbai. What with the prospective marriage, and perhaps other reasons, the two leaders became bosom friends. No sooner did Maibasar and Zhakip hear that Alshinbai was near, than both were ready to do his slightest bidding.

Maibasar never missed an opportunity to tease his nephew about his future bride.

"What a father-in-law you'll have! The most important man in the region! It's almost impossible to get to him. You must bow when he comes."

Owing to these jests Abai did his best to avoid a meeting with Alshinbai. But two days earlier, he had been summoned by Kunanbai and Alshinbai, who had rebuked him for his undue bashfulness. Although Abai considered himself a fully-fledged djiguit he was overcome with confusion in the presence of his father-in-law and kept out of his way. Alshinbai himself was not at all to his liking, and the endless joking and constant references to his future parents-in-law, the reiteration of the words: "wedding," "bride" and "bridegroom" made the thought of Dilda herself obnoxious.

But now, as they were walking, Maibasar regarded him earnestly and said:

"There is something I should like to discuss with you without any joking. And don't pout like a baby! You're a grown man and should understand that it's not without reason that so many horses and camels are being driven to Alshinbai's aul. When the new mosque opens and the holiday ends we'll talk more seriously."

As usual Abai made no reply.

"D'you think Abai does not understand?" Karabas joined in. "He's a clever boy and understands everything."

"Stop praising me, Karekeh! Keep quiet—it will be as good as a gift horse," answered Abai embracing Karabas.

With this man he could speak freely, not as with Maibasar. Abai liked Karabas and often jested with him.

"Just wait till we are finished with our business. We'll have a talk, and what a talk!" insisted Maibasars significantly.

"Father has probably decided to hasten the marriage. This time he means it," Abai thought to himself, worried, his anxiety reflected on his face. He could not have said why, but the thought of marriage evoked a feeling of hostility. The very name of Dilda seemed to curtail freedom and imply coercion.

He frowned, his eyes flashing angrily, the only sign of dissatisfaction he could allow himself—he was afraid to contradict his uncle.

They reached Kunanbai's house and all four entered the gate. Filled with men on horseback and on foot, the courtyard was unusually noisy. There were litigants and petitioners standing about everywhere arguing in groups of five and ten. The same words could be heard again and again: "The volost chief, the bii... the investigation, the verdict... the conditions, the fine... the guilt, peace, friction..." Most of them were of the Boshan people, as could easily be seen from their capes. The dress of the Tobikty was also in evidence, as well as the lambskins and peaked hats of the Kerei.

There were other marks to distinguish the clans, besides their clothing. Yesterday Karabas had explained the various horse and cattle brands to Abai, who now paused to look at several horses which stood tethered in the yard. The animals with round brand, called the "eye," belonged to the Argiz and Boshan. The "ox-saddle" brand belonged to the Kerei. "To whom does that grey belong? Oh, he bears the brand of the 'ladle' and must belong to one of the Naiman auls!" thought Abai. Some of the horses bore a brand not unlike the Arabian letter "shin," the special brand of important personages.

Abai would have liked to linger on, but his companions went straight into the house. Zhakip led the way and

opened Kunanbai's door. The four entered together and salemed in unison.

The large bright room was decorated with vivid, curiously designed carpets. Hanging on the walls, as was customary in town, were expensive fur cloaks, embroidered prayer carpets, and Arabian fabrics inscribed with proverbs and sayings. Metal bedsteads glittering at the sides of the room were heaped with pillows. Silk curtains formed rustling partitions. At the doors and windows, too, were rich hangings. Leaning back against down cushions, Kunanbai and Alshinbai sat on rugs piled before a low but spacious folding table. To the clear, respectful salem they replied without effusiveness, barely moving their lips.

The newcomers seated themselves to the left and right of the host and his guest. Alshinbai had been speaking, but before he resumed his discourse he paused to look questioningly at Kunanbai. The latter reassured him with a gesture; he could safely resume.

Alshinbai was portly, ruddy and silver-bearded. Over his beshmet he wore a fox-fur cloak slung carelessly round his shoulders. The small, steel-grey Kazakh cap planted firmly on his skull could not conceal his baldness.

"Baimurin too is dissatisfied," he continued his account. "He is annoyed and says as much."

Kunanbai turned to the speaker with a frown, but the other looked at him intently and added:

"This is what he said, 'They say that Kunanbai will be angry if Bozhei is my guest. Since when are the Tokbiky put in charge of my dinner bowls?'"

"And just why Baimurin chooses to take up the soeel for him, he did not care to explain, I suppose," asked Kunanbai sharply.

Abai knew what they were talking about. Two days before, his father had had a long talk with Alshinbai and had uttered this threat against Bozhei. "He'd better withdraw the complaint against me. If he does not, I shall

not rest until he is put in a grey kaftan and sent off to very distant parts!" Negotiations and a biting exchange of pleasantries between Kunanbai and Bozhei were conducted through Alshinbai and Baimurin, the latter being one of the most prominent Kazakhs of Karkaralinsk. Alshinbai had apparently come to pass on the latest thrusts of the opposing side.

Kunanbai had long had an idea that Baimurin was supporting Bozhei, and Alshinbai's words confirmed his suspicions. Kunanbai cared little about Baimurin, who was not his main enemy. Let him be insulted if he chose—this could worry only Alshinbai and not him. And Alshinbai was unlikely to quarrel with Kunanbai over his kinsman Baimurin—the ties between the two leaders were firm and had been repeatedly tested over the past few years. The prospective marriage and their friendship were more important to them than family connections.

Alshinbai began to ponder.

"First hear Bozhei's answer to your threat," he said finally. "We can discuss the other things afterwards. This is what he said, 'The grey kaftan was tailored not by the Mirza but by God and it yet remains to be seen who is destined to wear it.' Someone must be urging him on. Baimurin perhaps, or some other."

As they heard Bozhei's defiant words, Maibasars and Zhakip looked at each other and frowned, as if to say, "The man is asking for trouble." All day Abai had been wondering just how Bozhei would reply to the message conveyed to him by Alshinbai and was equally astonished by the answer. "What hatred lies behind those words!" he could not help thinking. "And how bold he is!"

Kunanbai sat silent for some time, his head erect; his single eye stared blankly into space and his pale, lowering features took on an even more sullen aspect. Not by word, movement or sound did he give any other sign of the turmoil raging within him.

Alshinbai looked away. Even he was somewhat alarmed at the expression on Kunanbai's face.

Everyone was silent. Karabas opened the door gingerly and entered the room.

"The mayir* has arrived, Mirza," he reported.

Kunanbai did not stir. The door opened to reveal the enormous bulk of the major. He was followed by the interpreter Kaska, a pale and withered Kazakh with a goatee.

After shaking Kunanbai and Alshinbai by the hand, the major did not seat himself on the floor, but reached for the only chair and sat down to face them. He had a fluffy yellow beard and big blue eyes that squinted slightly. At the nape of his neck lay fat folds of crimson flesh.

Among themselves the Kazakhs were in the habit of calling the "majors" not by their names, but by descriptive nicknames attached to the title—for instance "the bewhiskered major," "the fat major," while one pock-marked official was known as the "corn-crake major."** This one's appearance had given rise to all sorts of nicknames. By some he was dubbed the "cross-eyed major," by others "the hairy major" or "the pot-bellied major" by still others. Kunanbai and Alshinbai had a somewhat low opinion of his intellect and referred to him as "the pisken-bas-mayir"—"the major with the boiled head."

The chiefs of the Karkaralinsk duan (the Kazakhs called a district a "duan," and a district chief "the chief of the duan") were Kunanbai and the major. Kunanbai was considered to be the head of the district and "the pisken-bas-mayir" his deputy. It was this that gave Kunanbai the title of Aga-Sultan. The Junior Sultan, the third in command, was away at that time.

* As most of the tsarist officials in Western Siberia were military men, the Kazakhs usually called them "major," distorted to "mayir."—*Ed.*

** An allusion to the speckled eggs of this bird.—*Ed.*

The major had come to see Kunanbai about Bozhei—and the Irgizbai chief, so enraged by Bozhei's reply, was more than glad to see him. He wasted no time on preliminaries.

"Mayir, your forefathers were not of the Tobikty, but you seem to have found a kinsman here, in Karkaralinsk. Did I not say that Bozhei must be transported and this would settle the matter? But you're dragging things out and the affair is hanging on like some lingering disease. What is the matter? Has he settled in your liver,* or has he become a close kinsman of yours? Why do you uphold him?"

Balefully he regarded the major with his single eye, and the latter turned questioningly to his interpreter.

Kaska was horrified, his glance shifted from one to the other. On the one hand, his stock of Russian words was too limited to translate Kunanbai's statement with fluency, and on the other hand, he was simply afraid to convey such irate language from one chief to the other. He hesitated, smiling foolishly, and drew patterns on the rug with his finger.

Kunanbai exploded:

"What an interpreter! Tell him precisely what I have said! Stop fidgeting about like a wagtail!"

The comparison set Maibasars laughing, but a look from Kunanbai silenced him. Abai, too, was amused by his father's expression: the interpreter was so completely at a loss and really did resemble that small fussy bird as it hops over the sand.

Kaska slowly but precisely translated all that Kunanbai had said. But the major was not put out. Unhurriedly, he explained in a loud, but calm voice.

"We have no authority to avenge ourselves upon those with whom we quarrel. Bozhei Yeralinov has lodged many complaints. We must look into them. And he is not

* A play on words: *bau* means liver and kinsman.—*Ed.*

alone. There are many who support him. For the time being, we cannot exile him."

This was followed by a heated argument in which each sought to out-talk the other.

"Do you want to keep us eternally wrangling? Is that what you are after?"

"This is not merely my personal view," the major replied. "The former Aga-Sultan Kusbek and Zhamantai are of the same opinion. Even Baimurin—Alshinbai knows him—thinks the way I do."

"But who are they? Just a handful! They are the minority! They are just envious. But the people side with me. Can't you see for yourself?"

"The minority? Well, what if they are? Remember, the law has been laid down by the tsar, and all are equal in the eyes of the law. There are witnesses and we must hear what they have to say."

"And you're a judge? No wonder evil-doers grow brazen when you defend them!"

"Kunanbai Mirza, that rebuke cuts both ways."

"I know your little game!"

"Aga-Sultan, you are forgetting yourself! We were both appointed to office by the Corps!"* said the major.

He lit his pipe, rose and began to pace the room, flushed with anger.

Alshinbai saw that it was time to intercede. If the two chiefs were to continue in this vein, the altercation might lead to an actual rupture. This was not at all desirable, and Alshinbai could not let matters take a turn that might be harmful to Kunanbai and also to himself. He had been sitting very still, his elbow on the table, but now he quickly raised his head.

"Listen, Mirza! Listen, mayir! Come to your senses!"

Alshinbai was respected not only by Kunanbai but by the major, who had conferred with him on various serious

* The Kazakh name for Governor-General's office.—Ed.

matters in the past. Up till now nothing had happened to mar their relations. Though not officially vested with authority Alshinbai was a decisive force in the elections of the volost chiefs, even of the Aga-Sultan himself, and the major was aware of this. He paused in his stride as Alshinbai spoke, and glanced furtively at Kunanbai. The other too seemed to have been affected by Alshinbai's words.

The major resumed his seat. He was breathing heavily and wheezily, as though short of breath.

"You are the chiefs of the duan. How can you quarrel so?" Alshinbai began.

Leaning towards the major, the interpreter quickly repeated the words in Russian.

"You must support each other. If you are in harmony you will govern justly. How shall you rule in discord? Quarrels and wrangling would be fatal. You must co-operate. And if you cannot agree, then consult others. That is my counsel," he concluded, looking at the two of them and seeing that they had both cooled down a little. "As for Bozhei," he went on again, glancing at Kunanbai, "it is because of him that I am here, Kunanbai Mirza. Mayir, could you suspend your decision until the evening? Could you put off the matter till then? Tell me yes or no!"

At this point Karabas appeared from the outer room with a tall jar of kumys. Maibasar, Abai and the others silently spread the cloth and placed a brightly-painted bowl before each elder. Maibasar stirred the kumys with a long ladle of ram's horn, and the thick fluid, given a slightly yellow tinge by the leather bags it had been stored in, did not foam but swirled in gentle ripples. More bowls were brought in, containing fried dough balls. Hot dishes too appeared—not the usual fried minced meat, but Kunanbai's favourite kidney dish, which he liked to wash down with kumys.

When Alshinbai had finished, Kunanbai turned to him and the major:

"Let us eat—raise your bowls!" he said briefly.

Then he prayed, covering his face with his hands. Since he had begun to build the mosque and consort with mullahs and khazrets, he had grown very pious. Though he knew no words of Arabic, he observed all the formalities, always covering his face with his hands as he prayed and never forgetting to say "Biṣmyllya."

Alshinbai's speech had been interrupted by the appearance of the food, but there was nothing more to say. As Alshinbai had taken the solution of the problem upon himself, the major saw no reason for further discussion. If difficulties arose, he would consider what to do. And if not, the affair rested with Alshinbai.

"You are right," he said to Alshinbai, "I quite agree. I shall wait."

The conversation took another turn. The major applied himself to the kumys and drained five bowls, one after the other. Then he helped himself to some kidney, took his leave and departed.

It was then that Kunanbai unburdened himself of a thought which had been troubling him all the time.

"It seems that the crop of that 'boiled head' has been stuffed with bribes. Do you see how they have primed him? Through Baimurin his belly has been filled by Bozhei and Baisal."

Alshinbai thought much the same, but he could see deeper and a fresh suspicion arose in his mind. He sat for some time brooding.

"My dear Kunanbai," he began at last, "have you ever seen an official who did not accept bribes? Do they not grasp all they can and whatever comes their way, devouring everything like locusts? But then bribery is not the worst of it..."

Alshinbai now broached the subject which had brought him to Kunanbai. The habitual furrows in his brow deepened as he narrowed his eyes and said:

"I have stood by watching all your steps and all their consequences. 'An onlooker can see the game better than the player,' my father used to say. That's true enough and I must tell you this: it is time for the Tobikty to call off the game. If they do not, things may turn out badly for them."

Kunanbai was startled and alarmed.

"Alshekeh!" he exclaimed. "In the steppes Bozhei and Baisal were snapping at my feet, and here, in the duan, they are preparing to seize me by the throat! Why should I not throw everything into the fight after this?"

Impatiently Alshinbai raised his left hand.

"Of course, if you are going to continue the fight, you will throw everything into it! But they too will spare nothing. Don't forget the mayir! And there are not a few who like Baimurin will clutch at every piece of gossip and slander. Do you imagine they have resigned themselves to the loss of the aga-sultanship for all time? They've been lying in wait for you at every turn and this is a chance for them to drag you from the saddle. Think it over! A lawsuit involving your name can lead to nothing good."

Kunanbai understood. Both the major and Alshinbai knew very well that the struggle between the two large clans had sprung from personal enmity. Who could guarantee that no one would raise the question of how Kunanbai, the Aga-Sultan, could have raided Bozhei's aul, tied up the people and beaten them with whips? Who could be sure that affairs might not take a most undesirable turn? The fires were smoldering here and there: "Bozhei's complaint." "We must look into it." "There are witnesses!" All these were but sparks from the same fire.

Kunanbai regarded his companion thoughtfully, but said nothing; he wanted his friend to speak his mind. The other calmly returned his gaze.

"The mosque will be finished today," he added significantly. "You are landed above all other men, your name is on all lips. There are many who envy you, foremost among them the Corps and the mayor. If you yourself put an end to the quarrel, you will not be humiliated. All will understand that you have forgiven your enemy and wish to unburden yourself of worldly matters, engaged as you are with the consecration of the home of Allah as the Koran says. Thy kinsman shall not be thine enemy. Do not force Bozhei into the arms of strangers. Try to make peace with him."

Kunanbai thought long and hard. If a man like Alshinbai demanded peace, it was necessary to think well before refusing. Was he not the most influential of the biis in all Karkaralinsk region? Entire tribes came to him with their quarrels and differences. Had not Tyure Kusbek been removed from the office of Aga-Sultan after falling out with Alshinbai?

The Tobikty were by no means the strongest or most numerous of the tribes in Karkaralinsk region, and Kunanbai owed his aga-sultanship to his friendship with Alshinbai. . . . If he continued the feud against Bozhei, the latter would not stop harassing Kunanbai even if he lay prostrated. That was how matters stood. And if one considered who had been wronged, it was clear that he, Kunanbai, had wronged Bozhei. What indeed had Bozhei done to wrong him? Nothing! If Alshinbai desired reconciliation—he would have to agree. His decision did not of course imply that he was going to change his tune completely and give in at once.

If it had been someone other than Alshinbai, the Aga-Sultan would not have made up his mind so quickly. But it was Alshinbai who demanded reconciliation—and Kunanbai hesitated no longer.

"Alshekeh," he began, "you speak as a man who has weighed and considered everything beforehand. You speak as a friend. If I fail to appreciate this, the blame will

rest with me. I did not want to give way, but how can I disobey you and stubbornly go my way? I shall trust in God and you—please take over the matter and finish it yourself.”

The discussion was ended, and Alshinbai retired to his own quarters.

So happy was Abai for Bozhei that he even felt a grudging liking for Alshinbai. The fangs of hatred had been drawn and all was warm and friendly in the world. He sighed with relief.

Fond of solitude not only when he was sad, but also when he was happy, that evening Abai went wandering about the town.

The day was drawing to a close, but the sun had not set, and fiery red bands of light still hung over the tree-tops on the hills to the west. It seemed that a wind had arisen in the mountains, now whirling the snow round lazily, and now whipping it up in clouds that glowed ruddy in the sun's last rays.

The wind had not yet reached the town, but the biting cold was no encouragement to linger. It was an invigorating day, one that sent one's spirits soaring and chased away gloom. The slopes slowly disappeared into the darkness, and finally the foothills vanished, as though withdrawing for the night.

Abai had crossed some three or four streets when he saw a large crowd of people coming towards him, talking and laughing. Not one of them was known to him, but since they were on foot Abai judged them to be townspeople. Among them were young and old, and everyone was so cheerful and friendly that Abai could not help being interested. Smiling, he halted in the middle of the street. They came nearer, their many boots crunching the snow, but none paused to look at him. Now he could see that in their midst was a man of venerable age. He too was laughing, and was obviously arousing merriment among the others.

But why were they leading him in that strange way—supporting him on both sides? And why did he keep his head so erect, never turning to look at whoever he was talking to. On looking closer, Abai saw that the old man was blind.

He joined the crowd, as did all who happened to be passing or standing at their doors.

One elderly man, his beard streaked with silver, dropped behind a little.

"Who is that old man?" Abai asked him.

The other was astonished:

"Have you never seen Shozheken? Don't you know him? That's Shozhe, Shozhe the akyn!"

Abai had long heard of this famous bard, but had never seen him. He pushed forward, trying to get a better view of the akyn and hear what he was saying.

"Shozheke, please come to my house! It is right here! It is I, Bekbergen, who asks!" one of the company pleaded.

"No, he'll come with us!"

"But it was I who brought him from afar."

"What if you did? Shozheken will stay the night with us! We have his horse," another countered.

Shozheken stopped and laughed loudly:

"Well, my friends, shall I tell you what I intend to do?"

The crowd hung on his every word.

"Speak, Shozheke, speak up! Say where you should like to spend the night!"

"You wish me, my children, to dine with you and stay overnight in your homes? You have warmed my heart and I will prove it by visiting all who have asked me. I shall dine with you all. Shozhe's throat, I hope, will bear the strain of five or ten days' story-telling; and if my stomach is equally hardy I'll visit in turn all who shouted here. Now then, it has grown cold—it is probab-

ly evening and there is no need to pull my old limbs in forty directions at once. My children, let us enter the nearest gate."

All listened and agreed smiling. There was a gate nearby, and the akyn's prospective host rushed off to prepare the dwelling. The people still would not go away—Shozhe would not visit any other that night and none wanted to leave without hearing at least one of his songs.

An elderly man standing beside the akyn apparently decided to urge him on.

"Shozheke," he said, "you have just arrived in our town. Have you heard our news?"

"No. Tell me what has been happening here? Of what are the people talking?"

There was much to tell. The mosque built by Kunanbai was finished. Alshinbai and Kunanbai intended to hold a feast in honour of the occasion; then there were rumours that Kunanbai intended to make peace with his kinsman Bozhei.

Abai was surprised; he had not expected to hear his father's name here. "The mosque is one thing," he thought, "but the people seem to know all his business, even his quarrels!"

"Alshinbai can reconcile anyone!"

"Ah, he is simply afraid that Kunanbai may be thrown out of office if he quarrels with everyone."

"And who has brought the Tobikty into such esteem if not he? The respect they receive, the honours! It is to him alone they should be thankful!"

"Alshinbai supports them, to be sure!"

"He does! And the Tobikty devour all that's fattest in the droves and dig out all that's best in the shops!"

"They won't leave until they've devoured all the fattest horses around here."

Shozhe had been listening with a faint smile and suddenly he began to sing:

*A one-eyed buzzard and a cat that was bald
Made friends with a cur that was lame but
could pray.*

*The cat got all that the buzzard let fall
And the dog had his feed when the cat went away.*

There was a burst of general laughter; some clicked their tongues, astonished at the aptness of the words and the old akyn's quick-wittedness.

"The bald cat is Alshinbai of course!"

"And the buzzard Kunanbai!"

"And the Imam is lame, as we all know!"

"That old man has made short work of the lot of them in a single verse," the people agreed.

Abai flushed and turned away. At that moment the owner of the house appeared and invited Shozhe to enter. The crowd broke up and Abai strode off.

Shozhe's song still stung his ears; it had touched him to the quick. He remembered the words and involuntarily repeated this verse which levelled two mountains at once.

He whom none had dared to refer to other than as "Alsheken" had become a "bald cat"—Alshinbai's bald pate was well known. And his own father, the Aga-Sultan, the Mirza, had become a buzzard. And what a buzzard! He, the man who rolled in vast wealth, the ruler of the great Tobikty, was nothing but a predatory bird rending with his beak and claws everything that was most highly prized by the people!

Surely there was nothing on earth stronger than the word? Abai recalled the witty and clever Karatai; "A word can pierce to the core," he had said.

Abai was lost in thought. It seemed to him that he had found the great force destined to shake the world. Unaware of his surroundings or of the passers-by, he strode on.

But as he turned a corner he came upon three horsemen. He looked up and recognized the first as Bozhei. His pale face was sombre under his fox-fur hat, and the hoarfrost clung to his moustache. At his side rode Baisai and Baidaly.

Abai was dumbfounded—he had not yet had occasion to meet Bozhei in town. But recovering quickly, he advanced to intercept the riders in the middle of the road. They reined in their horses—either from surprise or because they recognized him.

With great deference Abai raised his right hand to his heart and loudly salemed:

“Assalauma-galeikum!”

At the madrasah he had been taught that such a greeting should be given to the khazret. Perhaps he had remembered the last words spoken by his mother when he had set off for Karkaralinsk? But no, the greeting had sprung from him spontaneously.

The unusual behaviour of the boy astonished Bozhei, and he brought his horse to a standstill.

“Uagalai-kumussalem,* my son,” he replied.

But Baisai recognized Abai and frowned.

“So it is he! Let us ride on!” He was about to spur his horse, but was checked by Bozhei.

“Stay.”

“Why? Do you think it is pleasant to hear a salem from the son of that devil?” Baisai regarded Abai morosely.

Abai reddened violently. His whole being was aflame. He had not merited the slight, and turned burning eyes upon Baisai.

Bozhei divined what was going on in Abai’s heart.

“Tell me the truth, my son. Was it your father who told you to salem us, or did you do so of your own free will?”

* The salem in reply.—*Ed.*

"My father has nothing to do with it. It was my will."

Abai was still under the spell of that pleasant feeling of harmony and tranquillity with which he had left his father's house.

Neither Bozhei nor Baisal had yet learned anything of Kunanbai's decision to make peace with them. They were now on their way to the house of Alshinbai, who had sent a man to invite them for negotiations, the subject of which was unknown to them.

"If you did this of your own desire and not because of your father's wishes," said Bozhei quietly, "then step up so that I can give you my blessing. I see sincerity in your eyes, my son!"

Baisal frowned again and would have urged his horse aside had Bozhei not detained him.

"This young man promises much, Baisal." Again he turned to Abai: "The future will rest on your shoulders, my son. May God give you all but the cruelty of your father!" He brushed his face with his palms.

Abai received the blessing, his eyes fixed on the man's face and his palms upraised. Then he also passed his hands over his face.

"His eyes are like burning embers," Baidaly said to Bozhei as the riders moved away.

Abai stood thinking for a long time.

Had all this been genuine? Had Bozhei been sincere? Perhaps he had merely pitied the boy because of Baisal's unkind words? But what had induced Bozhei to bless him so warmly? How had he been able to read his heart in an instant and to divine his thoughts? Bozhei hardly knew him! But old men are experienced, penetrating and wise, thought Abai as he walked on. If Bozhei had seen something that was good in him, then he, Abai, was not as bad as he himself had thought.

The more Abai considered the scene, the more his youthful self-esteem exulted. He felt that his heart was soaring to the heavens, on great, powerful wings.

Abai quickened his pace, only now noticing that it was quite dark. Suddenly he discovered that he had wandered two streets farther than necessary, and had to turn back.

In the aul Abai had always been fond of watching the twilight alone on a hill, and in the town he was moved even more by the meeting of day and night. In the summer he had often watched the hawk after its prey. At sunset, when darkness fought with light, the hawk, flying high in the last rays, burned in the sky like a mysterious flame, its wings like tongues of fire. On this evening his own heart, he felt, was a hawk. He was elated and taut as a bowstring.

How different this day had been from all the others! There had been his father and Alshinbai in the morning, Shozhe and the crowd in the evening, and now Bozhei and Baisal, who had just disappeared into the darkness. What strange and opposite worlds had come together in this crowded town of Karkaralinsk! What immeasurable gulfs lay between them! They were as far removed from each other as the ends of the earth. The one had power, the second artistry, and the third his heart. Why could not these merge into one? What would happen if all these men came together to act in accord?

This idea struck Abai with sudden force, and it seemed to him that no one had thought of it before. "Reason, will. . . . Power, glory, dignity. . . ." In books he had read of the constant conflict between these things.

Now he had seen this conflict in real life. And he reached a fresh conclusion: all these qualities should be combined in one man.

How many and varied were the people he had met in the town, and the thoughts that had come to him here! He had seen and heard the illustrious Shozhel. . .

It was dark when he reached Maibasars dwelling in a happy and buoyant mood. He stamped the snow off his boots more vigorously than usual, wiped them on the mat and went straight to the guest-room. His cheeks

were still ruddy from the cold and there was a new sparkle in his dark eyes.

There were many kinsmen in the room. Having failed to consume even a tenth of the fat horse during the day, they now fell to it with renewed appetites. A huge copper samovar appeared and the air was filled with the aroma of tea. Maibasars was glad to see the boy.

"Abai-zhan," he said, "where have you been? Take off your coat and have some tea. Warm yourself up!"

He made room for Abai at his side. The boy unhurriedly removed his coat and took a seat. Zhakip was sipping his tea noisily.

"Let's hurry with the tea," he urged the others, "it's time to go to the Mirza's."

"Yes," said Maibasars, "all is ready there—the rooms too. They say that the guests will come after the evening services."

"Well then, why hurry? The services in the new mosque will be long enough."

"Of course! Mullah Khasen's just been appointed Imam, and he'll make a great display of his talents."

"Very true. He will read slowly and chant the prayers exactly as laid down," commented the young men who had been chosen to wait upon the guests at Kunanbai's feast.

"What are you chattering about," objected Zhakip impatiently, "you too will have to attend the services in the new mosque! Maibasars, won't you go?"

The latter seemed not at all concerned about the services.

"There'll be no place for us in that crowd," he turned to Abai with a smile. "If we do get through, we won't get out in time to arrive before the guests."

"But how can you stay away? The Mirza will learn about it and be angry," said Zhakip uncertainly. "We'll sit near the door and be the first to leave."

"Ah, we'll find something to tell the Mirza," smiled Maibasar. "And I don't at all care to sit near the door. In a mosque, of course, one spot is as holy as another, but why should I, just because of the services, sit watching the boots of all the Boshan and Karashor and bang my forehead on the very spot where they wipe their clumsy feet?"

Maibasar's humorous tone appealed to Abai, and he laughed.

But Zhakip did not approve of this attitude: joking was out of place at a time when the long-awaited mosque was to be consecrated. The best people of Karkaralinsk would be at the services, and the whole town would be singing the praises of Kunanbai. "As usual, he has no sense of fitness," he thought. "He says anything that comes into his head."

"If you had any sense, you'd realize that the mosque will bring glory to the Mirza and to us all," said Zhakip significantly.

Maibasar at once grew earnest and gravely agreed:

"True, that mosque will fill the throats of our enemies with sand. Bozhei was quick to see this—that's why he's begging for peace!"

Just who was striving for peace was as yet an open question. But Kunanbai's men could not help boasting: "Bozhei has lost his courage! He's realized his helplessness and calls for peace!" Maibasar himself was the first to start such rumours.

"The revered Alsheken is a true friend," Zhakip supported him. "His heart and soul are with the Mirza. Do you know what he said today? 'The glory of the Mirza is growing and all are envious—the tribes and those in power.' And he is right too. The mayor is green with envy because the building of this mosque has brought our Mirza universal esteem and glory and the mayor has been eclipsed."

"That's not the only reason why the 'boiled head' is angry," interjected Maibasar. "He's as likely as not received many bribes from Bozhei and Baisai, and that's why he was holding out. But now he's lost the game, you see?" Maibasar laughed. "There's no one left to bribe him. Peace will be restored with Bozhei this evening. Have you heard that he'll attend the services in the mosque and take part in the Mirza's feast?"

Neither Zhakip nor the others had heard of this, and Abai too heard it for the first time. It took everyone by surprise.

Maibasar was pleased with the effect of his words.

"Alsheken always supports good intentions," he said. "It is with good reason that so many of our horses have been driven to his aul!"

He turned to Abai and regarded him intently.

"Do you understand? Just try to get out of it this time!" he was reverting to his usual jests.

But Abai was not so easily embarrassed this time. Not a trace of his former bashfulness remained.

"There you go again, Maiekeh! What if I never ride for my bride?" he replied in an even tone.

"Ah, what a misfortune! The boy has lost his nerve. But as the saying goes: 'There is no rest for a bridegroom, even in the grave, once he's begun to pay the bridal money!' What's the matter with you? There's a bride awaiting you with a neck as soft as the down of a falcon. And she is probably thinking, 'Just let him try not coming for me this time!'" Maibasar was eager to have a good laugh at the youngster's expense.

But again Abai was not at all put out. Smiling, he reached for the dombra behind him and struck a few notes. Maibasar waited for his reply and, receiving none, carried on:

"Why don't you answer? You shall have all these djiguits as companions if you will but agree to make the journey."

"And I say stop this, Maiekeh!"

"I'll do nothing of the kind!"

"Now what good does it do you? I would understand it if you were a zhengeh."*

"Though I am not a zhengeh, it will do me good just the same!"

Abai laughed.

"Do you really mean to continue?" he asked in an unusually mischievous tone.

He laid the instrument down, and looked at his uncle, a merry twinkle in his eye.

"Of course I do! Will you ride for her or not?" Maibasar challenged.

Abai narrowed his laughing eyes in just the same way as Shozhe, raised his head and sang:

*I have begged you to stop,
And yet you will not;
So now you shall see
What you'll get from me!
Are your pockets so bare
And you've nothing to spare
Though you've robbed every shop
From bottom to top?
All that's nothing to you
Who have seen something new,
And are anxious to ride
Yourself for my bride!
But Alshinbai
Is no small fry
And you'll do better
To forget the matter.
It is not fair—
As though I were
A pedigree bull
For the bride's aull!*

* Zhengeh—sister-in-law or any young woman.—Ed.

*And what are you worth
If such is your mirth?
You've had your deserts;
Now answer in verse,
dear uncle!*

Laughing, Abai fell against Maibasar's shoulder.

All the djiguits, too, were rocking with laughter at this unexpected outcome, which pleased them greatly. Maibasar was quite taken aback, and finally let out a string of oaths.

"Well, well, you see what this rascal gets up to. What can I say to that?" He managed a grin.

"You may answer, Maiekeh, but only in verse. Otherwise, I won't listen!" Abai teased.

"You've got your deserts," guffawed Zhakip, purple in the face. "You've been pestering him, and now he has put you where you belong. . . . You've got your just deserts all right!"

"Well, anyone can see that he's an offspring of Shanshar! He takes after his mother Ulzhan's people. Wait till we get back to the aul. I'll repay you for this. I'll tell your mother all about it," threatened Maibasar.

The hint was not lost on the others.

"True! He's a Tontail!"

"A direct descendant!"

"It was certainly a witty answer—as witty as Shanshar himself," remarked several others.

"Well, I think he's heard the song somewhere or other. That good-for-nothing can never have made it up!" Maibasar could not recover from his surprise.

It was true that no one had ever noticed that Abai was given to composing songs, and the boy himself was surprised at the effect of his jest. He was even somewhat confused.

"It was not I who thought it up," he said with a mischievous smile. "I have just seen Shozhe—it is his song."

The djiguits were dubious and showered him with questions.

But Abai held to his own.

"I told him I had an uncle called Maibasars," he explained quietly, "who was always teasing me, and begged him to teach me how to answer. And so he sang me this song!"

It was true that Abai was still under the spell of Shozhe's nimble wit, his well-aimed words and subtle ridicule. He was delighted to have brought Maibasars down so deftly. "My song really was like Shozhe's. Perhaps I too should become an akyn?" He was filled with strange envy and longing.

The djiguits listened incredulously to his story about Shozhe.

Suddenly the door opened and Karabas appeared. There was a tense silence. Barely across the threshold the messenger proclaimed:

"Hurry! The services are over and the guests are gathering in the Mirza's house. You are wanted at once! Hurry, everyone!"

They all hurried to put on their outdoor things.

Abai was uncertain whether to go or not.

"They won't let you serve the guests and carry the food," Zhakip said to him, "and you'll find it rather awkward sitting there with your father amid the elders. The place will be crowded. Perhaps you had better stay here."

Abai would have been quite willing to stay, but Maibasars and Karabas advised otherwise:

"Let him at least see the guests and present his salem!"

"Come and see how guests are received in town. You may learn something."

Abai changed his mind and set off without haste, some time after the others.

When he arrived, the guests, who had developed quite an appetite during the long services, were already at the table.

The courtyard was filled with saddled horses. Except for the servants and those busy with cooking there was no one to be seen. The horses and their elaborate trappings were outlined in the silver of evening hoarfrost, and the runners of the decorated sleighs crunched in the cold. Here and there a sleigh driver sat dozing in his great sheepskin cloak.

A large wooden structure opposite the porch of the house served as a kitchen. The door kept opening and closing as the djiguits who had just come from Maibasars carried out dishes of steaming meat. Maibasars and Zhakip were loitering between the ante-rooms and the kitchen. They too had found no places in this house packed with guests.

Izgutty was supervising the distribution of food.

"This way! Hurry! Yes, this way! Step lively!" he commanded briefly.

In his light beshmet lined with fur and his sleeves rolled up, the swift agile Izgutty looked rather like a hunter. It was clear that he was sparing no effort to please the host and his guests.

Abai was compelled to step aside as Karabas rushed from the door and charged into the kitchen. He tried to enter again, but was startled by a cry behind his back. It was Izgutty shouting:

"Out of the way there!"

Four djiguits came speeding out of the kitchen in single file, carrying large deep bowls of meat. As they passed Abai, the air grew fragrant with the aroma of fat, bursting horse-meat sausage. Layers of sheep's tails and the yellow fat of withers and udders gleamed like molten gold. Everything steamed in the frost, and every

other dish was graced with a sheep's head. Abai made another determined attempt to enter, but was almost knocked over by Karatai, who suddenly emerged from the door.

"Where's the meat sauce? You said you'd serve it separately!"

"Just a minute! The sauce is ready. Here it is. They're bringing it!" Izguttu shouted.

Annoyed at the delay, Abai at last entered the ante-room, but he accidentally brushed against Izguttu's arm as the latter stood ladling the sauce on the plates, and a splash or two fell on to the floor.

"Oh, you scoundrel! Who did that?" He turned angrily, but lowered his voice when he saw Abai. "Oh, it's you. You'd do better to stay in some corner. What do you want in all this hurly-burly?"

Abai pressed himself against the wall and looked about. Galoshes and top-boots stuffed with felt stockings stood in rows on the floor. From the room on the right came the loud voices of Alshinbai and the major, and sounds of laughter. Alshinbai was in high spirits that night, and his sallies set off the guests again and again.

The room facing the door was also filled with guests, who sat in a compact circle. Most of them were town merchants, Tartars and Kazakh bais, with the Mullah Khasen, the Imam of the new mosque in the centre. Here the company was not so noisy. More concerned about their dignity and general decorum, the guests laughed but rarely and with propriety. The third room, on the left, was occupied by the elders and heads of the Boshan and Karashor clans. Here too spirits ran high, the conversation was animated, and the jests were followed by burst after burst of laughter.

Abai entered none of the rooms, but merely glanced into them. From his vantage point in the ante-room he could hear and see everything. If only the irate Izguttu

had not interfered! Abai sat on a chair, forgotten in the bustle, and watched the djiguits rushing to and fro.

Eight men were engaged in taking in the dishes to the guests, who were devouring amazing quantities of food. Encouraging each other, they attacked everything with the zest of funeral feasters. As Abai sat watching them they probably consumed several mares, one- and two-year-olds, as well as innumerable sheep.

The djiguits grew even busier. Empty dishes had to be taken from the rooms to the kitchen. And no sooner had the last of the empty bowls disappeared from the room in which Kunanbai sat than a fresh procession of platters and dishes of steaming pilau emerged from the kitchen. This tempting brown stuff seemed to whisper, "How could you help eating me? You couldn't refuse, could you?" No one spoke loudly in the ante-room—Kunanbai had trained his djiguits to maintain strict order. Zhakip, Maibasar and Izguty took up positions at the doors, examining each dish as it passed and signifying approval by a wave of the hand.

Next came the tea. It was long past the usual hour for retiring and everyone should have been sleeping long before, but in the three rooms there were none who refused the proffered food, and the feast went on as lively as ever.

Abai rose with a yawn and decided to return to Maibasar's. During the evening not one of his kinsmen had exchanged a friendly word with him, and the djiguits had been too busy all the time.

As he wrapped himself in his squirrel-skin cloak prior to leaving, he heard snatches of song coming from Kunanbai's room. Though busy with the food, the djiguits paused to listen. Abai went up to the door and gently pressed it open a little. The singer was a swarthy man with a long greying beard.

As though moved by some strange invisible force the bard sounded his theme on the dombra, then laid it on his knees and let his words flow light and swift as the wind in the steppes.

"Who is he?"

"Who is that poet?"

"What akyn is this?" asked the guests in all the rooms, and the djiguits listening outside.

Karatai looked in through the door of Kunanbai's room and proclaimed:

"It is Balta! Balta, the akyn!"

Sure enough, it was Balta the akyn, the inseparable companion of Alshinbai, who was improvising.

*And if you do not like the bride,
Then go and find a better!
And if you find the hat too tight,
Then go and see the hatter!
And if you think you're always right,
Be sure, your friends know better!
And if you oppose the entire tribe,
You'll surely end in fetters!
For who will say that you are right
And observe the law to the letter?
But if you are friends again tonight,
Then all will love you better!
Let kinsman in his kin confide
And all will love him better!*

The akyn Balta was silent.

"That was good!"

"Like pearls!"

"Sacred words!" cried Alshinbai, Karatai and the interpreter.

So swiftly and aptly composed, this plea for peace and reconciliation pleased Abai. He wanted to hear more and brought his chair closer to the door, but the sing-

ing was not resumed. The conversation now turned upon more serious matters.

Abai at last caught a glimpse of Bozhei. His features showed not a trace of anger, nor did they express a complacent or conciliatory mood—but only cool, watchful restraint.

Abai shifted his glance to Kunanbai. The latter also seemed to be wary and not at all disposed to make merry.

Alshinbai and Baimurin now guided the conversation on to serious matters. Large-nosed Baimurin, a fair-haired giant of a man, had brought Bozhei to reconcile him with Kunanbai. Now only the two of them would speak, he and Alshinbai, two who had no personal claims but spoke on behalf of Kunanbai and Bozhei for the general good.

Abai turned away. There were no more songs and the talking was of little interest to him. Just then Karatai came out and beckoned to Izguty and Maibasar.

"The reconciliation!" he exclaimed. "They've made peace! Alsheken and Baimurin talked on behalf of the interested parties—and the Mirza and Bozhei have come to terms."

"What terms? What have they decided?" asked Maibasar leaning closer.

"It is an unusual decision," answered Karatai. "This is what they said, 'If you had belonged to different tribes we should have advised you to establish kinship. But you are kinsmen, and kinsmen by blood! You must, therefore, strengthen this tie: let Bozhei take a child from Kunanbai and let him rear it. Through this child you will become reconciled.'"

"Is that what they've decided?"

"Which child? One of Kunanbai's own children?" demanded Maibasar and Zhakip.

"Yes, that's what I said, Bozhei must adopt one of Kunanbai's own children," explained Karatai and hurriedly returned to the guests.

Abai was aghast at the news.

"Who will he take? Whom shall we have to part with? Ospan? Or Smagul?" He was certain that a small boy was meant. How could they deprive a child of his mother and compel him to live with strangers? The very thought seemed monstrous. It was as though one of his brothers had been taken by death, an innocent, carefree child torn from its mother.

3

Three weeks later Kunanbai ordered preparations to be made for the return journey.

"If God permits, we shall depart tomorrow. Make everything ready for the way and let there be no delays. We shall start at dawn," he warned Karabas and Zhumagul.

No sooner had the news reached the Tobikty than there was a great bustling in Kunanbai's house and the dwellings of Zhakip and Maibasars.

Both old and young rejoiced, but Abai had been longing for home more than anyone. In his dreams during the past few days he had again and again seen his mothers and the aul of Zhidebai. Everyone worked with a will, and everywhere there was jesting and laughter.

"We are going home! Home!" These rumours had been current for five days. Therefore the horses and saddles were ready.

But during this long sojourn in town the horses had grown too fat, and before setting out they ought to have been driven about for a week, then rested and prepared for the winter journey. Abai was to ride his cream-coloured Aimandai. This stallion, with his glistening black mane and tail, was renowned for his long easy stride.

Swift and light, the handsome animal was coveted by every djiguit.

Aimandai was stabled with the elders' horses, and Abai hurried to see him as soon as he heard of the preparations for the return. Tethered in his stall, the animal stood shaking his head impatiently, the white spot on his brow shining like a full moon. There had been no occasion to ride in town and Abai had not visited the stables of late. It did his eyes good to see Aimandai. With a handful of hay he wiped the hoarfrost off the animal's back and mane. Then, like an experienced djiguit, he felt for the withers; his long thin fingers could barely encompass them, Aimandai too had grown fat. Abai stepped back to look him over from the side: the horse's back had filled out.

He embraced the stallion's neck. "Why tomorrow?" he thought. "We could start today—this very minute."

He had a saddle quickly placed on the horse and covered with a velvet cloth to make it more comfortable. Abai fastened his fur hat, mounted and rode into the open.

As light as a breeze Aimandai set off as usual with his long swinging gait the moment he received the bit, and sped away as easily as a skiff dancing in the wind. It was almost evening before Abai dismounted, having ridden about at random—beyond the town, to the bazaar and to his kinsmen's houses.

After dinner and tea with his father, he mounted again and headed for the bazaar. This time he was accompanied by Izguty, who acted as Kunanbai's housekeeper. At dinner Abai had asked his father for some money and the latter had commanded Izguty, "Go to the bazaar with him and let him choose gifts for his mothers and brothers. Buy everything he asks for!"

They rode around the bazaar until sunset, buying all kinds of things. Abai knew of his grandmother's fondness for strong tea and this was his first concern; then

he bought quantities of sugar, sweetmeats, velvet and coloured silks.

When his saddle bag was filled to bursting, he thrust his purchases into his bosom, wedged them under his belt, stuffed them into his boots, or handed them to Izguty. It was dark by the time they returned.

On the eve of their departure, Kunanbai again gathered all the elders and the biis, the major and his interpreter. Abai did not attend the gathering, but in another room repaired his travelling bags with the aid of Karabas and Izguty.

It was time to retire for the night when the major emerged from Kunanbai's room in company with Izguty.

"Where is the man who does not crave to enrich himself at the expense of the Mirza?" sighed Izguty when he returned from seeing the major off. "The Boiled Head too has walked off with a generous morsel!"

"What did he get: money or cattle?" asked Karabas.

"The Mirza said to him, 'You are a chief! Let the people see the chiefs ride in state!' And he presented him with the three blacks which he himself had received as a gift. Five hundred rubles, too, were stuffed into his mouth."

The major was not the only one to receive gifts on the eve of Kunanbai's departure. His interpreter was not forgotten, and fifty head of cattle were herded to Alshinbai's aul on Kunanbai's behalf by Karatai and Maibasars, who returned late the same night.

Three days before his trip to Alshinbai's aul, Maibasars had again attempted to tease Abai. But remembering what his previous effort had cost him, he was too cautious to go straight to the point and began in a somewhat roundabout way.

"Again I shall be shamed by the kelin,"* he casually

* Kelin—mother-in-law, but more frequently, the wife of a younger relative.—*Ed.*

remarked, as though addressing himself to the elder men and expecting their support.

"I won't go," Abai cut him short.

This put an end to the badgering. Nor had Kunanbai any intention of sending Abai to his father-in-law yet, as he was intent on returning to his aul.

But when Maibasars returned from his mission in Alshinbai's settlement, Abai could not help remembering that Dilda lived in that aul—and for the first time in his life he experienced some inexplicable stirrings deep down within him, a feeling that he would like to see his betrothed.

He had never seen her and wondered what she was like. "A neck as soft as the down of a falcon," Maibasars had said. He tried to imagine the soft down of a falcon, or a goshawk. "Perhaps he should have gone after all." The idea was fleeting, at once eclipsed by the thought of the coarse jests of Maibasars and others like him. His heart sought Dilda, but not that way, not through these humiliating customs, through these ritual visits that filled one with shame.

Abai tossed and turned in his bed, and it was well into the night before he fell asleep.

At dawn the return journey began, as ordered by Kunanbai. All the Tobikty in the town set off in groups from their various houses to join Kunanbai on the road.

Kunanbai and his party of thirty wasted no time in making farewell calls, but began the journey immediately they left the house. More than a hundred elders, biis, and officials had arrived to see the Aga-Sultan on his way. "Khosh, khosh!" they called from all sides. "A happy journey! May you reach your home in peace!"

The way from Karkaralinsk to the Chinghis Mountains was by no means short and travelling was that year exceptionally hard because of the deep snow. Both the hillsides and valleys were covered with a solid crust of

white. The fierce winds had not abated that year. Blizzards raged for a week or more on end and filled the air with stinging particles of snow. The wind moulded the drifts into curious undulating patterns, and there was no path for the travellers to follow.

The straggling column advanced like migrating cranes or wandering auls.

Kunanbai led the column, mounted on a well-fed golden pacer with a white mane. Well-knit and strong, this animal did not droop its head like the others. This was Kunanbai's favourite stallion on the long winter journeys.

The Aga-Sultan too looked impressively large in his black fur cloak with a silvery belt, and his fox-skin hat topped with black velvet. The swift and even stride of his pacer forced the others to keep up a fast trot. Whenever Kunanbai slowed down the pace, Abai's steed Aimandai would amble along easily. But the moment Kunanbai chose to give rein, Aimandai would change to a trot and shake Abai up painfully, making riding very uncomfortable.

"This is torture! Why is Father in such a hurry! It's like sitting on a log with someone hammering at the end," Abai complained to Karabas.

So badly had Aimandai shaken up his rider on the first day that the latter had lost his usual skill and was unable even to control the folds of his cloak.

"Never mind! You'll soon get used to it! Gather your cloak round you!" Karabas comforted him.

Abai would have so much preferred a peaceful, ambling gait. But Kunanbai had calculated the time of the journey to a day and would not alter the pace to suit anyone. Whether there was a road or not, in frost or wind, he pushed stubbornly on, drawing his companions in his wake.

During the day Kunanbai strove to cover as great a distance as possible, but when he paused for rest at the

auls it was difficult to get away. Everywhere his appearance evoked an almost worshipful deference, as though he were a hadji returned from Mecca.

One thing, and one thing only, was on the lips of the aksakals, elders and devout believers in all the auls: "The mosque! The mosque!" There were old men who flatteringly assured Kunanbai, "You have risen from the midst of a simple tribe to be a khan!" "You have emerged unscathed from battle!" "You are a mighty nar* in tinkling bells!" The fount of their flattery never ran dry; and they went to great lengths to please the Aga-Sultan.

During the winter the atkaminers of many of the auls had come to Kunanbai in Karkaralinsk for advice in various controversies. Among them there were some whom Kunanbai had helped to pay off old scores with their enemies and to recover previously sustained losses. In such auls Kunanbai was inevitably led aside for consultations. Later his train would be enlarged by extra riding horses and mares fattened for slaughter.

Two black amblers, a grey and three or four other stallions were tethered to the horses of Karabas, and some of the grooms. Though these gifts at first astonished Abai, he did not think much about them. But the nearer they got to Tobikty territory, the more numerous became the presents. There was scarcely anyone in Kunanbai's party who was not leading a horse by the halter. When they reached Tobikty land the gift horses were so numerous that they were driven ahead in a drove.

What better evidence could there be of the esteem the Aga-Sultan enjoyed on his journey? And if anyone in Kunanbai's aul was at that moment foretelling the future from the droppings of the sheep, he must have observed: "The sides of the travellers are fat, and they are laden with spoils," as though returning not from the

* Nar—dromedary, a symbol of strength and power.—Ed.

town, but from the land of an enemy whom they had pillaged.

On the seventh day of their journey Kunanbai and his company reached the western slopes of the Chinghis. He had stopped nowhere except to spend the night—they had not even halted for midday meals.

On that day the column overtook three djiguits who had been sent ahead as an advance party—just why, Abai did not know.

On the slopes three riders could be seen driving a great drove of horses.

"There they are," said Maibasar.

And sure enough—these were the three djiguits of Kunanbai and before them they were driving more than a hundred horses. The animals had evidently been picked with care—they were well fed and had high withers.

Kunanbai rode into the midst of the drove to examine them.

An inkling of the truth dawned upon Abai.

"What horses are these? Who is their master?" he asked Karabas as he came closer.

"These are gifts. Gift horses for your father."

"What sort of gifts? From whom?"

"Are you a child? Has your father no people under him? What do you think happened to all the people who crowded around him in the town? Doesn't he deserve something for his efforts on their behalf? Should he work for them without reward?" Karabas was amazed at the question.

Abai asked no more. Now he knew everything. Although he had been with his father so long he had never suspected the source of his wealth.

He remembered Shozhe. Though he dwelt far away, the old akyn evidently knew more about Kunanbai than his own son did. He must indeed have known him well to brand him so aptly. "How awful!" thought Abai,

burning with shame—he felt as if the old akyn stood near him at that very moment....

The cavalcade was again on its way and it was hoped to reach Kunkeh's aul at Karashoky before nightfall. On this very day Abai would see all his friends and relatives, but even this prospect could not lighten his heart.

The longer he thought, the more he understood about his father's underhand and dishonest affairs. It was from such droves, too, that the fifty head of horse had been sent to the aul of Alshinbai. The kalim! And so the payment for his bride was also being collected in this manner?

"Her neck is like the down of a falcon." Such were the words with which they were attempting to excite his desire for his betrothed. Dilda ... his betrothed.... But what was happening? The clear, unsullied world of his youthful dreams was gone. "Betrothed!" It was a beautiful and sacred word, but it had lost its former meaning. Resentment welled up within Abai for himself and for Dilda. It was more than resentment—it was anger....

Extortion was the most heinous of sins, one that could never be washed away. This he had often read in the holy books. It was the sin which for all time had sullied the memory of Kengirbai, a famous bey of former times. Such wealth was sordid spoil torn from the meek, who were trapped by the exigencies of fortune. Barlas or Shozhe would say that it was an inexpressible sin. And "The home of the Almighty," the mosque which was Kunanbai's crowning glory—had that too been built on such means? How could a mosque erected with bribes continue to stand? Why did it not collapse under the weight of its shame? It was monstrous that in such a house the mullah would piously wail the words of the Koran in the exaggerated Bokhara fashion, would cite the commandments and other holy teachings of the Prophet on behalf of God!...

Kunkeh's aul was reached towards evening, but Abai did not stay with his father and set off at once for Zhidebai in the company of Zhumagul. He was impatient and rode hard all the way.

Although it was late, Abai's mothers had not yet retired or even begun their evening meal when the two riders dashed by their windows with the dogs yelping at their heels.

It was a tall, manly youth who entered to salem them. He had the weather-beaten face of a traveller, his step was firm and his bearing reserved. The entire household rejoiced at the sight of him.

"Abai!"

"Abai-zhan!"

"My darling!"

"My lamb, my little black lamb! Abai-zhan!" cried his mother and grandmother. Delight shone in every face.

Everyone was well. Grandmother and Mother felt very well indeed. In turn they fell upon him with their kisses. Ospan too was still awake, and shrieking with joy, he kept jumping up and down, slapping his thighs.

"What have you brought? Where are the sweets? Give me them!" He would not let Abai exchange greetings with his mothers, Gabitkhan and Takezhan. Quickly he searched in Abai's bosom and pushed his hands deep into the pockets.

For about a week after his return Abai did not leave the house, even for a walk, being particularly anxious to avoid his father. In Zhidebai it was learned that there was a great gathering in Karashoky and that the aul of Kunkeh was crowded, many people having come to inquire about the Mirza's health. But it was only Takezhan who set off from Zhidebai for Kunkeh's aul: he had heard of the horses that had been presented to his father.

"People say they're choice horses! Kudaiberdy of course

will take the best." Takezhan was envious of his elder half-brother, the son of Kunkeh. "But I'll pick some too. We'll see who gets the best!"

He rode off to Karashoky and stayed there.

For days Abai related all that he had heard and seen in Karkaralinsk to his mothers and Gabitkhan. His younger mother Aigiz also came to hear the news.

Abai told them about the reconciliation with Bozhei, but said not a word about the agreement to deliver one of the children to him. This fearful decision weighed him down like a constant burden. Let his father tell them about it. He, Abai, had not the heart to mar the joy with which his mothers had received him. How they would take it remained to be seen. If he were to say anything about it now, they would burst into tears, be seized with despair and say things they would regret afterwards. He had better not torment them!

On his way to Zhidebai he had decided that this was the best course and had asked Zhumagul, his companion, to say nothing about it to anyone.

Five days later it was learned that Bozhei had arrived.

Kunarbai at once dispatched Karabas to Zhidebai.

"The Mirza sends his greetings," said the messenger to Zereh and Ulzhan. "Many guests will arrive tomorrow. This gathering and the final reconciliation with Bozhei is to take place in the Great House. Bozhei and Baisal will be here. The Mirza has asked you to prepare to receive the guests in a fitting manner."

Ulzhan was not put out. With the aid of Aigiz she had everything ready by the end of the day. She ordered the great carpets and ornate felt rugs to be unpacked. These and the bright draperies enlivened all three houses—Zereh's Great House, the Guest House and the home of Aigiz. Mountains of fried dough balls were prepared, sheep were broiled whole, great quantities of cheese and many other things were got ready. The butter for the

feast was chosen from such stocks as were not strongly salted and were therefore tastier.

Kunanbai and Bozhei arrived on the following day, their respective attendants following them.

As Bozhei crossed the threshold of the Great House, old Zereh arose, approached and kissed him with tears in her eyes.

"Oh, light of my eyes! Is your heart embittered with us? But you were always as a son to me, and I as a mother to you!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, zhariktik!* Our gentle mother!" cried Baidaly, Suyundik and other companions of Bozhei, deeply moved by the words of the old woman.

Bozhei himself was moved. Sighing, he embraced her firmly. Without words, by a mere gesture of the hand, he begged her to be seated and settled next to her.

For some moments he was silent, and then turned to the children. Abai sat near his grandmother. Bozhei summoned him and pressed his face to the young man's head. He then kissed Ospan and Smagul—wanting to show gratitude to Zereh for her affectionate reception.

Bozhei revered the Great House. To him this was not merely the house of Kunanbai, but of the entire tribe—cosy and hospitable.

When Bozhei and his companions had been seated, Kunanbai too appeared, attended by Karatai, Maibasar and others.

Abai could not bear to see his father sitting next to Bozhei. It was necessary to make room for the elders and on this pretext he left the room.

Nor did he return that evening or the following morning. His mother told him that Kunanbai and Bozhei had been polite to one another, but had shown no warmth and had spoken in monosyllables.

* Zhariktik—deferential form of addressing the aged, an expression emphasizing their superiority and moral qualities.—*Ed.*

On the morrow Bozhei was to leave. The hour had come for the dreadful decree to be put into effect.

Aigiz was rent with sobs and sank to the floor. Karabas took Kamshat from her hands, dressed the little girl and carried her to the Great House. Tiny and flaxen-haired, the child regarded the company with shining eyes.

"Aga, ata! Ata, aga!" she lisped, lingering over the words.

Ulzhan could not look at the child. Overwhelmed with pity, she left the room. Zereh fell to the floor, weeping silently. To Abai it seemed that the elders exuded a coldness that chilled the heart; he too left the house.

Kunanbai observed these signs of distress and the compassionate faces with the piercing gaze of his only eye. He was carrying out the decree of Karkaralinsk—he had taken a child from its mother and given it to Bozhei.

Kamshat sat quietly unaware of her fate. It was only when a strange man picked her up and carried her away that she called, "Apa, apa!... Azheh! Azheh!"* and began to cry.

Her little heart was wrung with fear and she screamed as though her tiny feet had touched hot coals.

Her pitiful voice could be heard for as long as Bozhei and his men were in sight. And the farther their horses carried them, the more pitiful and desperate it grew, like the shriek of one who is drowning or burning at the stake.

* Azheh—grandma.—*Ed.*



In the Thickets

I



BAI continued to live with his mother and grandmother in Zhidebai. He had not left the settlement since the day of his return.

Books were his only concern in all the months until the spring. Having been away from school a long time, he had somewhat forgotten his Arabic and Persian, but he had dictionaries borrowed from Gabitkhan.

Mullah Gabitkhan was a great lover of books. Among his collection were the works of Firdousi and Nizami, of Fizuli and Navoi, the *Zhamshid*, *The Arabian Nights*, the *History* by Tabari, *Jusup and Zyuleika*, *Leili and Mejnun*, and *Ker-Ogly*. Abai read avidly all day long, and between tea and supper in the evenings he would relate the most interesting passages to his mothers.

"That is a good thing, my son," Zereh said to him when she saw that he was drawn to books. "How many there are in this world who think of nothing but eating and sleeping! They waste their lives in idleness—and remain empty-headed good-for-nothings! Don't be like them—don't part with these pages of wisdom!"

Grandmother's veneration for his books delighted Abai and the books engrossed him even more. His fascinating tales, now told daily, were heard by all—by the mothers, the servants and the children. Aigiz, too, came from time to time and sat listening for hours. After Kamshat had been taken from her, she had grown meditative, pale and faded; the shadow of grief had settled on her beautiful features. How well Abai understood her! When she came to listen, he retold the stories with especial zest and care.

Abai grew to be a splendid story-teller. Even Gabitkhan listened with interest.

Unfortunately, however, all the books had been read by the beginning of spring.

Abai had retold them all, and now the entire aul pestered the shepherds and "neighbours," who in turn related what they could remember from Abai's stories. None, however, could speak as well as Abai.

"The summer is near, and the mares are foaling," Ulzhan chided them jokingly. "If we go on like this, we'll drag out the winter, and that will be bad!"

But when alone with Abai, she often asked him to repeat the stories she liked best.

Gabitkhan and Abai obtained other books from the mullahs and the pious book-lovers. On one occasion Gabitkhan visited Kunanbai's aul in Karashoky and returned with an entire sackful of books.

Kunanbai had come by them in Karkaralinsk through Mullah Khasen. Once asked for them by Abai, he had replied, "Stay and read to me. But if you want to enjoy them alone, I won't let you have them." Abai had not wanted to live with his father and so did not get the books. But now Gabitkhan had managed to induce Kunanbai to part with them, and this was real treasure-trove for Abai and the entire house. Unfortunately, how-

ever, Abai was soon summoned to Karashoky by his father and had to leave.

No sooner had he appeared at Kunkeh's aul than his father entrusted him with a message for Kulinshak, one of the elders of the Torgai. Abai memorized the message and set off on the same day in the company of Karabas.

The aul of Kulinshak lay not far off. After the seizure of the Bokenshi lands in the autumn, the Torgai had acquired the western slopes of the Karashoky where Kodar had once wintered.

Abai halted at the grave of Kodar and Kamka to say a prayer, the fearful scene as fresh in his memory as though he had witnessed it that same day. The memory revived. All the horror, the pain and the tears. And so when they arrived and dismounted at the aul of Kulinshak, the young man was silent and reserved, as befitted a far older person.

The people here were still living in their winter quarters. The yurtas were generally set up next to the wooden dwellings at the first sign of warm weather, but Kulinshak was still in his house.

As a messenger from Kunanbai, Abai was received as an adult, despite his youth. When the greetings and the usual formalities were over, Kulinshak called to his wife:

"Khatin,* prepare something for the guests!"

Of his five mighty sons, known as the "five dare-devils," only Manas was at home. He was truly a giant of a man, young and strong, with a handsome clean-cut face. Now he sat quietly strumming a dombra, casting unfriendly glances at the visitors.

Tea was soon ready. Manas's young wife spread the cloth and brought the refreshments. She had a longish face, a straight thin nose, and wisps of bluish black hair peeped out beneath her shawl. Abai could not help

* Khatin—wife.—*Ed.*

liking her, for there was something winning about her innate nobility, her tidiness and friendly concern for the guests. Each of her movements was modest and graceful. When she had served the tea, Abai at last spoke of the purpose of his visit.

"Kulinshak-aga!"

Kulinshak turned to him, extracted a small horn, tapped it with his finger-nail, took a pinch of tobacco and sniffed it with pleasure.

"My father sends his salem."

"And may he keep in good health as well."

"He wishes me to tell you about Betkudik fields which used to belong to the Borsak, but have now passed to Akberdy together with the winter houses. Last year you took up these grounds by agreement with the Borsak, but now Akberdy has said to my father, 'What if Kulinshak intends to set up his yurtas there again in the spring? I'd like the land to rest fallow for a time. I shall make hay there in the autumn. Let Kulinshak find another place for his auls.' He asks this of you through my father."

"Akberdy is nothing to me. What does your father think?"

"My father agrees with Akberdy. He's sent me to ask you not to wander to Betkudik this year."

Abai's voice was firm. He spoke calmly and to the point, quite like a man. Kulinshak nodded, but his smile was without mirth.

"Let us take tea," he urged.

Abai took up his bowl, waiting for his host's reply.

Two bowls were emptied, and still Kulinshak said nothing.

"Now, my son," he turned to the boy abruptly. "Does your father know how things stood with the Betkudik fields? When they belonged to the Borsak we occupied those grounds by turn and shared the hay equally. Does he know this?"

"Yes, he does. And this is what he says, 'Ownership is one thing, and agreement is quite another. The owners of the grounds were the Borsak. Kulinshak occupied them not as an owner, but merely by agreement with the owners. If he can come to a similar agreement with Akberdy, let him continue to use the land. But he must remember that it belongs to Akberdy,'" concluded Abai.

"In other words, Akberdy is the master of the horse. If it suits him, we can ride behind him—if not, then we can walk. Why not put it plainly and say, 'You must give up Betkudik though it lies directly before you!'" Kulinshak spoke sharply.

Abai sympathized with him and would not have pressed the matter. He had not realized what a disagreeable task his father had given him. Only now he understood from Kulinshak's disturbed expression what a role he had been assigned.

"I have only told you what my father has said. The rest depends on you. Do as you think best."

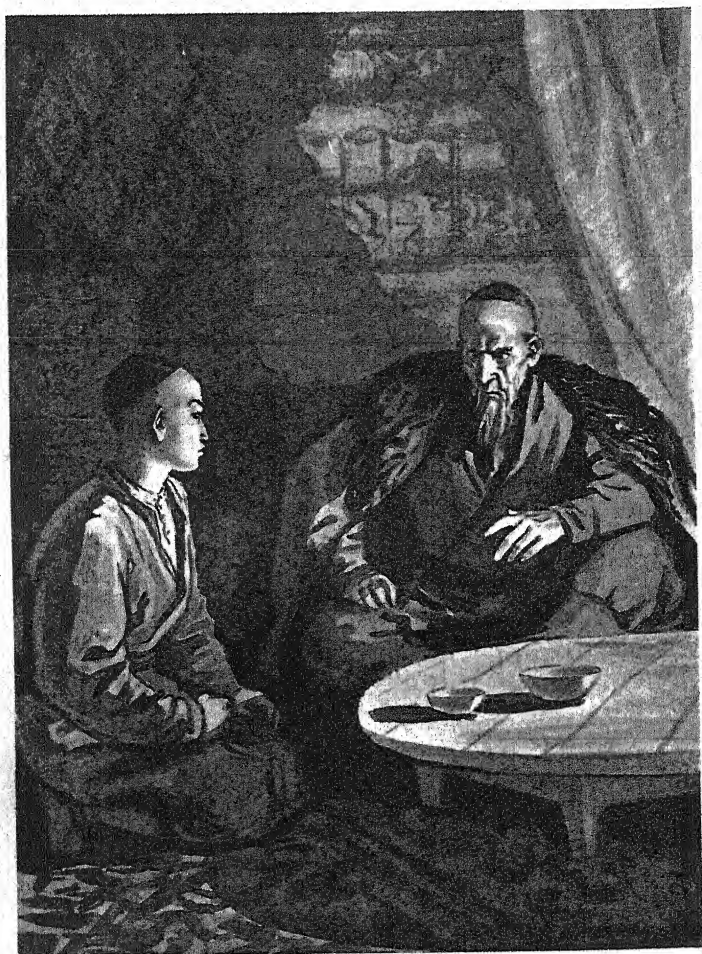
"It can't be helped," sighed Kulinshak and with a bitter smile he added: "Trouble and Akberdy go together—if not for the one, there would not be the other!"

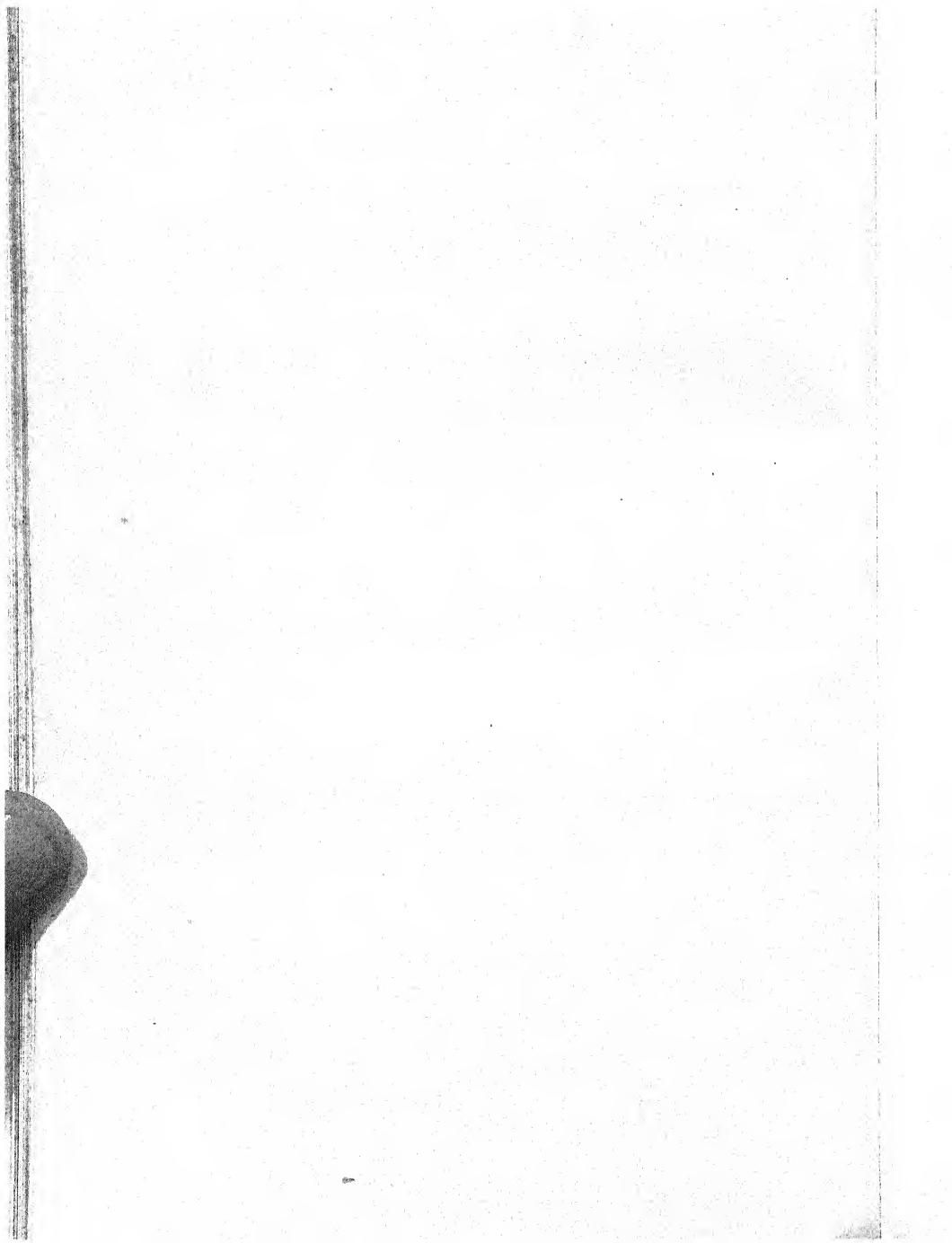
Kulinshak's remark somehow caught Abai's fancy and he promptly recited:

*The land and the moon,
The stars and the water
Are Allah's own boon
To Akberdy* his porter!*

The quip made everyone laugh. Manas's wife, who was pouring the tea, clicked her tongue and glanced at him with pleasure. Kulinshak was delighted.

* In the Kazakh language Akberdy means sent by God.—Ed.





"Well put, my son! May your words reach Akberdy!"

Then he changed the conversation, and asked Abai about his family, about old Zereh and Ulzhan.

"Tell me, my son, have you heard anything of the child that was given to Bozhei? They say that poor Aigiz is broken-hearted."

This was a painful subject for Abai. He did not answer, but Kulinshak continued:

"The Zhigitek, it is said, are dissatisfied because they were not properly compensated for their injury, and I have heard that your little sister is badly treated. Poor Aigiz probably realizes this. How does she feel?"

"Aksakal, please tell me, why are your sons called the 'bes-kaska'?"* asked Abai, in an effort to change the subject. "Aigiz and I were wondering about it yesterday."

"A sharp youngster," thought Kulinshak, seeing that Abai had evaded his question. "He can hold his tongue all right! They've already taught him that." He smiled.

"That's what they think of themselves—five bold fellows! But just whom they've put fear into I don't know. Empty talk! When the Bokenshi refused to give up their winter grounds and said they would rather die than leave Karashoky, I went rushing to the place with my five as soon as your father gave the command! I'd hoped to receive at least a scrap of the land that was to be taken. And what did we get? A slap in the face—that's all they got, my five heroes!" concluded Kulinshak, returning to the issue so embarrassing to Abai.

"But there's a saying: 'From a people who have been

* Bes-kaska is a play on words, meaning either "five bald men" or "five bold men."

beggared take not so much as a buldergil!"* Who will benefit from what is taken from the plundered Bokenshi?" demanded Abai heatedly. "And they are not strangers to you—they're your kinsmen!"

Kulinshak was of a different opinion. Though Manas and his wife fully agreed with Abai, he continued to harp on his wrongs and to complain about Kunanbai to the end of the conversation. Abai saw that the main reason for Kulinshak's being upset was that he had been overlooked in the division of the spoils, and the young man could not help wondering at such brazen greediness.

On his return Abai told his father that Kulinshak had agreed, but said nothing of his annoyance. He described his visit briefly, in as few words as possible.

Kunanbai then summoned Karabas and, man to man, asked him for a detailed account. Karabas could not praise Abai highly enough.

"Your son wasted no words," he said. "He spoke well and with dignity, as a man should. He was not embarrassed in the least and talked to Kulinshak as an equal."

Karabas would have liked to go on, but Kunanbai dismissed him with a wave of the hand.

He was satisfied with his son's conduct and on the next day sent him on another mission. Again accompanied by Karabas, Abai this time set off to visit Suyundik.

The two reached the Bokenshi chief's aul as darkness was falling. Driven from its old lands, the settlement was now in a ravine known as the Camel Humps, in the upper reaches of the Karaul. The Bokenshi were living in their yurtas—there had been no time to erect sturdier dwellings for so many.

* Buldergi—the leather loop attached to the handle of a riding-whip.—Ed.

Suyundik's Great Yurta was warm: on the outside it was protected by two layers of felt, while the interior was lined with brightly patterned woolen rugs.

Abai was still wearing his winter clothing—a jacket trimmed with squirrel fur and boots lined with felt—and he did not feel the cold. This was the first time that he had entered a yurta that day, and it was refreshing and strangely gay—in the early spring he was particularly fond of life in the tents, where one could breathe the pure air of the steppes.

A lamp glimmered feebly in the depths of the yurta. Besides Suyundik, his wife and his two sons, Adilbek and Asilbek, there was one other present whose appearance was the very embodiment of the loveliness of spring—Togzhan, the daughter of Suyundik.

She kept coming in and out from the Small Yurta of her mother, Suyundik's younger wife. The sholpy* in her hair tinkled at every movement. The tiny earrings, the small beaver cap she wore, and the gems on her fingers—all these seemed dainty and beautiful to Abai. She had such a delicate face, a well-chiselled nose and dark eyes. Her eyebrows, long and sharply defined, spread between her temples like the wings of a swallow. As Togzhan listened, laughed or was embarrassed, those exquisite brows would one moment rise in a slender arch and the next relax in a smooth curve. Perhaps they were the wings of an invisible bird, now spread for flight, now level for soaring.... A bird? No—rather a spirit, intangible and swift. It would dart away, high and far and tempting. Abai could not take his eyes off her. He stared entranced, not noticing that he was thinking of her in images of the Eastern poets.

Togzhan had come to the yurta to wait on the guests. She told the servant to spread the cloth and

* Sholpy—a gold or silver ornament worn in a young woman's hair.—*Ed.*

serve the tea and herself took a place at her father's side.

"Suyundik-aga," Abai addressed his host, "why is the lone mountain over there called Karaul?"*

"Who can say, my son," replied Suyundik, adding: "There was a time when the Tobikty and the Mamai were constantly at war. This name must have come down from olden times."

"You suppose that the name came from us, the Tobikty?"

"From whom else? All places here received their names from the Tobikty."

"What about Chinghis? Was there ever a man called Chinghis among the Tobikty?"

"No! You are right. How did that ridge come to be called Chinghis?" pondered Suyundik.

Adilbek was annoyed to see that his father was at a loss and hastened to the rescue.

"They say the name comes from the word 'shinkis.'** The winters have always been very cold here."

"That's not likely," objected Abai. "Chinghis was the name of a famous khan."

"That's true. I've heard of him—I can't quite remember what. Tell us about him, my son."

The young man related all he knew of Chinghis Khan and his conquests and ventured a few guesses of his own:

"That is probably why the ridge is called Chinghis and its highest peak Khan. The other mountain which stands apart from the others may have been the site of his camp. That, perhaps, is why it is called the Horde. And it is possible that the name Karaul, too, springs from that time."

Suyundik listened with interest. Togzhan noticed that her father was so engrossed that his bowl of tea had

* Karaul—watch-tower.—*Ed.*

** Shinkis—real winter (shin—true, kis—winter).—*Ed.*

grown quite cold. But she herself found it difficult to take her eyes off Abai. The older people felt ill at ease, embarrassed by their ignorance.

"No doubt that is how it was," repeated Asilbek and Karabas.

Completely captivated by Abai's tale, Suyundik himself offered him a fresh cup of tea.

"Please help yourself, Abai," he said, proffering the zhent,* the butter and the fried dough balls.

Togzhan was astonished at these marks of attention to so young a guest. Abai more than once caught a glance from her shining eyes, and it was not idle curiosity that he saw there, but deep attention and understanding.

Never in his life had Abai regarded a girl with such interest. Togzhan returned his gaze, but then blushed and looked aside.

Suyundik was deep in thought.

"It is not he who has lived long who knows all, but he who has studied much."

To this Abai added:

"It is from such respected men as yourself that I have learned all I know, Suyundik-aga. And if you will permit," he added after a pause, "I should like you to explain something to me—something you yourself once said."

"What was it, my boy?"

"I remember that when a certain decision was reached about the land near the Horde, you declared, 'I am not guided by your sheep, but by God's justice.' What did you mean?"

There was hearty laughter from Karabas and the two sons of Suyundik, who apparently all knew the answer. Suyundik seemed ill at ease.

"Perhaps it would be better to ask your father?" he suggested.

* Zhent—cottage-cheese mixed with butter and honey.—*Ed.*

"But you know, Aga, that my father won't waste words on a boy."

"But surely you know it has something to do with him?"

Karabas and the others continued to laugh, amused to see Suyundik dodging the question.

"I know that much, and no more," said Abai.

"Well then, you'd better let him tell you about it himself."

"I thank you for your kind advice, Suyundik-aga—but they say you spoke those words after you had quarrelled with my father."

"Quite true."

"What good will it do if I learn the cause of the quarrel from my father alone, and your sons from you alone? We'll never get to the truth that way. Each of us will know only one side of the story, which will confuse us and make us, the young people, look askance at each other. But if I learn the story from you, and your sons from my father, we'll get the matter clear and the scales will be even."

Abai's argument was convincing, and Karabas was pleased.

"The boy is right," he exclaimed, urging Suyundik to answer.

"You've hemmed me in on all sides, my boy," smiled Suyundik. Still anxious to avoid an answer, he turned to his sons. "Just see how eager our young guest is to learn!"

The tea was finished, but Togzhan did not tell the servant to remove the tea things. She sat listening and smiling. Often catching her eye, Abai could feel that she was looking at him with the confidence and attention of an old acquaintance or even a near friend.

Finally Suyundik gave up.

"If you insist, then I may as well tell you," he began. "Since his youth, your father has been a friend of Kozhekpai's father of the Mamai tribe. Two years

ago Kozhekpai, who had some difference over land with a poor relative, asked your father to help, and incidentally sent your father some three hundred sheep. The Mirza then asked me to mediate between the two. I heard both sides of the matter, gave my decision conscientiously and went to supervise the proper division of the land. Your father had arrived, too, and was riding behind me with his friend Kozhekpai, who, as I could see, was not at all pleased at the way I had handled the matter. He was very angry—just raging. I heard him complain to the Mirza and finally your father shouted to me, 'Hey, turncoat, where are you going?' This made me so angry that I called back, 'I am not guided by your sheep but by God's justice.'

"What happened then?" asked Abai.

"Why must you know what happened then, my boy? Things went from bad to worse. One complication after another...."

Suyundik waved his hand as though to dismiss the matter; his face darkened.

Abai grew very red, and Adilbek, Suyundik's abrupt and uncouth younger son, who was not at all like his friendly brother, was gratified to see that the visitor was disconcerted. "He has asked for it, and has got it," he thought. But Abai took himself in hand and again began to question the old man. Now he wanted to know the meaning of a verse Suyundik had sung at the memorial feast of Abai's grandfather, on the occasion when Maibasar had quarrelled with Bozhei. He remembered the words well:

*To those who sow discord and hatred
God will give no rest,
And Grandfather now lies berated
By those whom he loved best.*

"Just what discord and hatred did my grandfather sow, and between whom?" Abai wanted to know.

"Oh, Abai-zhan, why do you make me rake up the past?" asked Suyundik resentfully. "You'll listen to my stories and tomorrow I'll be at loggerheads with your father!"

"Why, no! Suyundik-aga, please believe me! I want to know these things for myself alone and not to complain or stir up strife!"

"Well said, my boy. I think I might as well tell you about it. As you know, the Uak people lived not far away. Your grandfather induced a section of them to side with him and caused a bitter quarrel between them. Then he sent your father to the aid of the Uak leader Konai. The strife grew more and more bitter. When Konai fell upon the people they had to flee, and they hid in the rushes by the lakeside. On Kunanbai's advice Konai then set the rushes on fire, and the poor, frightened people had to come into the open, where they were cut down helpless and defenceless—but what is the good of talking of things that happened so long ago. Let us eat—they have just brought the meat." Suyundik was anxious to change the subject.

Abai grew thoughtful. In the reddish flicker of the lamp his pupils gleamed with a curious, far-off light of their own. Togzhan could no longer conceal the warmth of her gaze.

The evening meal was served, and since the guests were kinsmen the entire family was present. Togzhan sat between her parents, quite near Abai. Now he could see her profile. The line of her little nose seemed even more fascinating, and her chin was small and delicate, a light rosy apple. Her long black braids did not entirely conceal the white of the neck, and ornaments glittered at the lobes of her ears like tiny drops of water.

Togzhan was in the grip of a new emotion which wreathed her in blushes one moment and the next

turned her suddenly pale. Abai again sat lost in admiration.

Suyundik's home was known for its warm welcome and hospitality, and that night, too, the repast was ample. A sharp knife with a yellow haft of horn in his hand, Karabas carved the horse sausages and lumps of horse fat.

All fell to with a will, but Abai scarcely touched the food, well cooked as it was. Togzhan, too, rarely stretched out her small white hand graced with rings and bracelets.

"Why don't you eat, my boy? Do have something!" Suyundik and Asilbek pressed Abai.

The hot dishes were followed by kumys, over which the company sat for a long time; conversation was lively and time flew.

But Abai spoke so little that his hosts at last decided that he must be sleepy. The men left the yurta while the women prepared beds for the guests.

Eager to be alone, Abai went out with a lightening of the heart. The stories told by Suyundik had troubled him sorely, but the pain had receded, had settled somewhere deep down, and given way to a new emotion. Into Abai's mind leapt a word he had heard from others and come across many times in books—beloved. What a stirring word! Today it had somehow escaped from the songs and the books and appeared before him in all its charm and meaning. It had become real for him in the laughter, the gestures, the smiles and the breathing of a young girl with a delicate face, a slender form, and a glance that sent his heart racing.

Greatly moved, Abai raised his face to the stars. A spring breeze blew from the mountains, and he drank it in greedily.

The moon was on the wane. She was rising gently to the zenith of her course, remote and alluring in those clear cloudless expanses, and his heart was filled with ecstasy and sadness.

From the Camel Humps one could vaguely see the folds of the Chinghis, whose rugged heights lay still in silver slumber.

There was hardly a movement among the enormous flocks about the aul. The sheep were asleep, soundless and unknowing. Asilbek and Adilbek had retired for the night, and Suyundik and Karabas were busy with the horses. The tunduks of the yurtas were safely down, and the tents stood gleaming, ghostly and secretive. And in the breath of this spring night Abai could feel the approach of morning, a fine and splendid morning that would shine for him alone.

"Was this love, really love? If it were, then here was its cradle—the world nestling in the stillness of the night!" Thus spoke the heart.

The moon seemed to be bathed in milk. Abai felt as though his breast could not contain this mighty flood of emotion, and his blood coursed turbulently through his veins.

"What is happening to me?" he wondered.

The white hands of Togzhan, and her delicate throat. She—she was his morning.

Thy dawn is in my heart, my love....

It was not Abai who spoke, but his heart. This was its first song of love—the song of Togzhan. The melody came effortlessly and the words floated lightly, freely.

The sound of Karabas calling him brought Abai back to earth. Everyone else had gone to bed.

The song was gone. On his way to the tent he could remember only one line:

Thy dawn is in my heart, my love....

When Karabas and Abai entered the yurt, Suyundik and his wife were asleep on their high bed behind a golden curtain of heavy silk. Togzhan, too, had probably retired. The beds for the guests were being prepared by the woman who had poured the tea in the evening.

As Abai approached his couch, a curtain stirred suddenly and bells tinkled at the entrance as the graceful figure of Togzhan appeared. She was carrying a silken cover, and moved unhurriedly, even slowly. At each step silvery music tinkled lightly.

The servant had deftly made up a soft and comfortable bed for Abai. But Togzhan, still with the cover in her hands, said quietly:

"Please, make it a little higher at the foot!"

In these few words Abai could feel solicitude—for himself! What was he to say? He would have liked to say something, but his heart was too full. And he could not find the words.

Togzhan laid the silken cover on the bed and was gliding away, towards the door.

She had certainly shown great solicitude for him—perhaps it was a silent mark of respect. Was that all though? Could it really be all? Togzhan did not look back until she reached the very door; then with a surprisingly lissom movement she turned and smiled—and was gone.

What was behind that smile? Mockery perhaps? Perhaps he had deserved it in some way? Abai was perturbed. Quickly he undressed and slipped under the blanket.

He could still hear that tinkle, growing fainter and

fainter—or was the beating of his heart, loud like the thunder of hoofs, shutting out all other sounds? And then the silvery melody was suddenly gone, as though snatched away by an invisible hand.

Karabas blew out the lamp.

But what did it matter to Abai whether the lamp was lit or not? To him the whole world was bathed in a dazzling radiance. He did not even notice the darkness. Although his eyes were closed his mind raced on, as though caught up in a whirlwind.

He did not fall asleep until dawn, but at the first stirrings in the yurta, he awoke and got up, pale and drawn.

Emerging from the yurta for a breath of air, he wondered in which of the tents Togzhan slept. Not the next-door yurta surely? That must be Asilbek's tent. The six-section yurta behind it no doubt belonged to Suyundik's younger wife. The tunduk was down, and Togzhan and her mother must still be asleep.

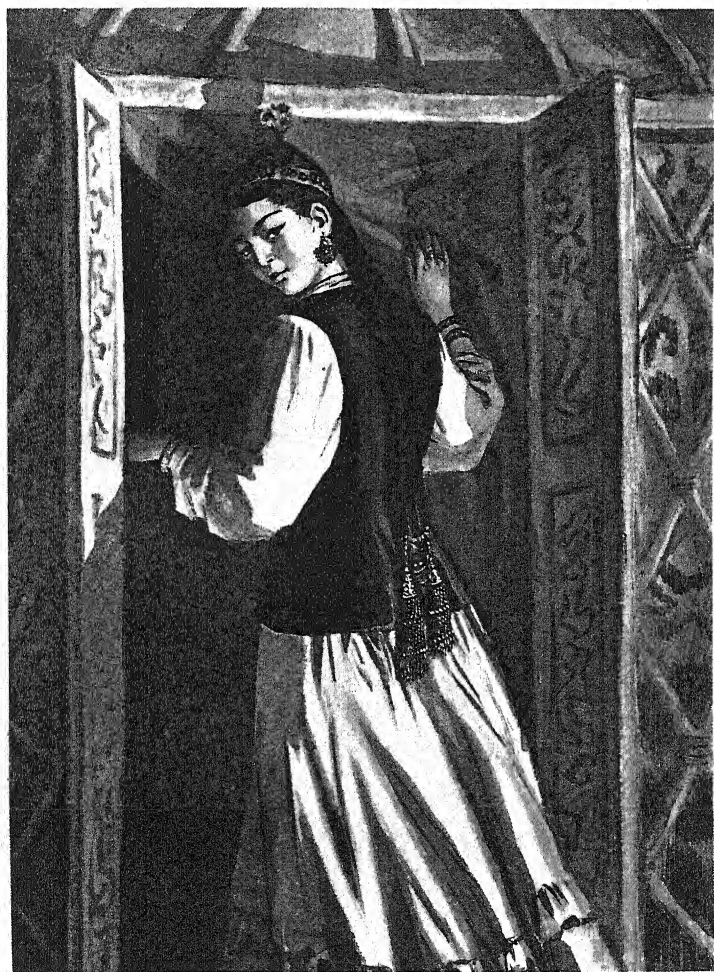
Suyundik was up, and came out of his yurta. Abai presented his salem and gave him his father's message. The conversation was brief, and Suyundik led his young guest to tea.

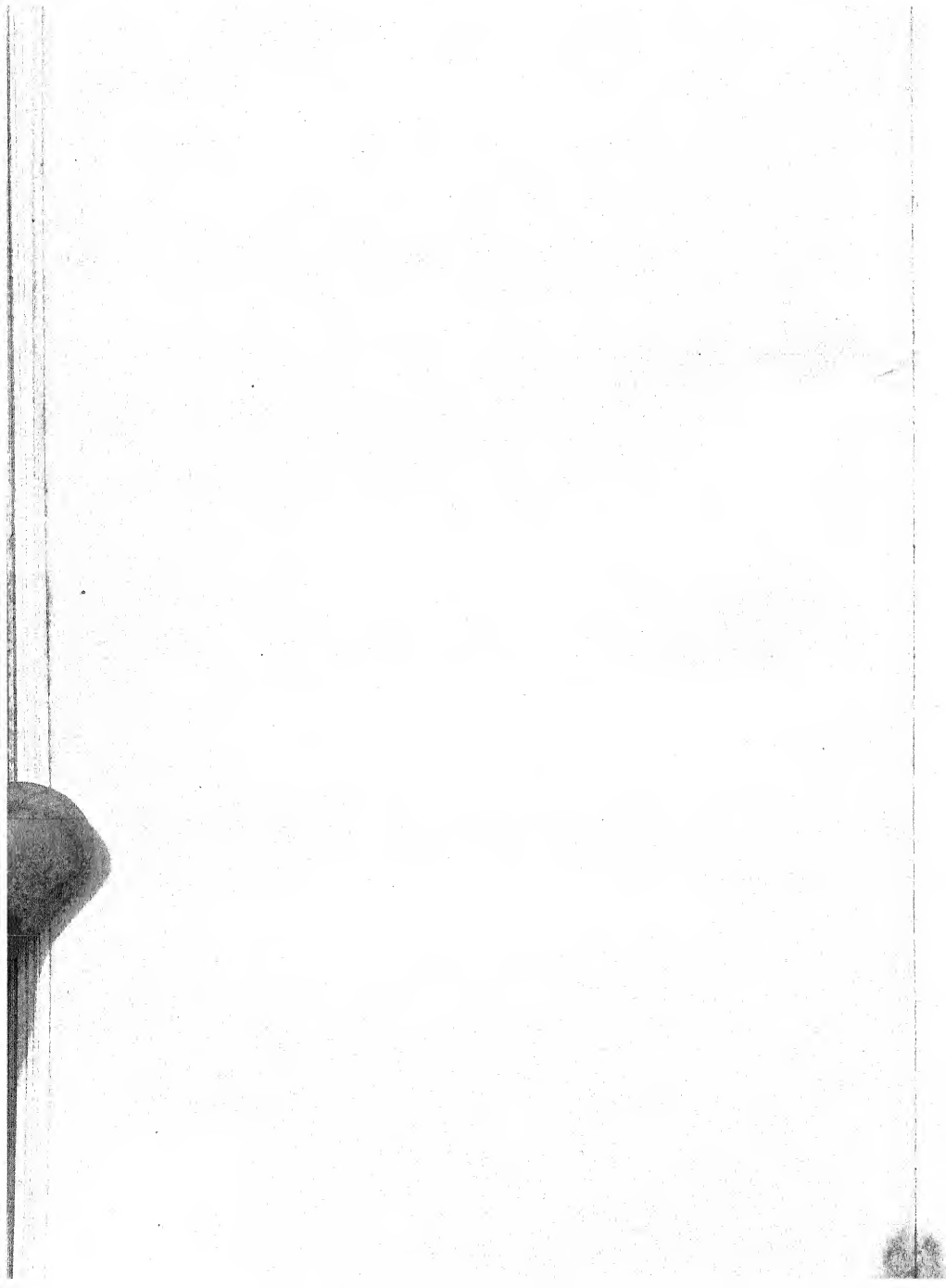
Togzhan did not appear, nor did Asilbek or Adilbek. Anxious to make the return trip while the morning was yet cool, Karabas went off to saddle the horses directly after tea.

But Abai was reluctant to leave. They were hospitable, kindly people who dwelt here, their home was like a warm and cosy nest. "If I were a near kinsman," he thought suddenly, "I would visit them often, very often, whenever I liked..." But it was time to go.

Suyundik asked him about Ulzhan and Zereh.

"Convey my greetings to your mothers, my son," he said.





The baibishe,* who had not spoken a word the night before, now asked that her respects be conveyed to Ulzhan; then she remembered Aigiz and little Kamshat.

"Tell me, my dear, have you heard anything about the child that was given to Bozhei? How does Aigiz bear the separation? And how could your people bear to take a weeping child and hand it over to a stranger?"

Her words expressed surprise and condemnation. Abai's answers were brief, but this did not discourage her.

"Bozhei's wife is hard-hearted. She has daughters of her own and is not likely to care much for that poor child," she added sadly.

"But what about Bozhei? Even if she cares nothing for the child, he will watch over it," interjected Suyundik to soften her words.

"Oh, I don't know. I've heard that in their aul it is commonly said, 'They had no cattle to spare for us and gave us that chit of a girl instead,' and the child is ill-treated. They took her from her mother, and all to no purpose! Poor Aigiz is worn to a shadow," and the baibishe wept with pity.

Abai was moved. Her sincerity and sympathy were obviously genuine. These rumours disturbed him, and at home, in Zhidebai, the news would cause fresh suffering. He remembered how Aigiz and his grandmother had wept. But then it had only been the sorrow of parting. How their hearts would be chilled when they heard these fresh tidings of evil import! Yesterday Kulinshak had spoken of it, and today the people of this aul. Everyone was saying that little Kamshat had been abandoned, had been given into slavery, humiliated and helpless. Surely there must be some grain of truth in it

* Baibishe—elder wife.—Ed.

all! In Zhidebai he would tell them all he had heard about little Kamshat. His father could say what he liked, but he was determined to do this.

Before their departure the guests were once again offered kumys, and were not allowed to go without a last generous repast.

They had taken their leave of the elders of the Great Yurta, and the horses had set off, but Abai still could not take his eyes off the Small Yurta; its tunduk was closed as before.

"Togzhan does not care to see me again! She does not even come to say good-bye." Angrily he lashed his horse, but could not help looking back once more. A woman stood beside the Small Yurta. She wore a black hood and flowing white garment. Was it Togzhan? Probably she had just got up. It seemed that he could hear the tinkle of the sholpy in her hair; or perhaps it was only his heart singing? But to stop just now would have been impossible.

Camel Humps, the very name of the aul now dear to Abai, was soon left far behind. Skirting the foothills of the Chinghis, the riders moved along the banks of the Karaul River. Abai brought his horse to a walking pace.

Suddenly he heard the pounding of hoofs behind and his heart stirred within him, filled with hope as it had been the night before. Hastily he looked back, but the rider, a square-set djiguit, turned out to be not from Suyundik's aul. As he approached, Abai could see that he was quite young, with just a faint line of down above his upper lip. His brown mare was shorn in the manner of the three-year-olds. He presented his salem, smiling cheerfully.

He had found it dull riding alone, and had overtaken the two so that he would have someone to talk to. The breast of his mare was streaming, there was foam at her mouth, and her nostrils were dilated.

The newcomer was welcome and the usual introductions were made. The young man turned out to be Yerbol, the son of Komenbai, and came from Suyundik's aul.

Karabas was soon chatting with the young man as though they had known each other a long time. Abai listened and felt strongly drawn to the young djiguit. Yerbol was a near kinsman of Suyundik, his mother being a cousin of Togzhan's mother, and he could visit Suyundik's house whenever he pleased. He was talkative, cheerful and immediately won Abai's heart.

There was plenty of game in the area, and Abai observed that the hunting must be good.

"Have you a falcon?" Yerbol responded promptly. "If so, come to visit us. I'll show you where there are plenty of ducks and geese."

At home Takezhan had a falcon, and Yerbol's invitation was very tempting to Abai. Almost before he was out of Camel Humps, he had been tormenting himself, trying to devise all sorts of schemes: when and on what pretext could he return? This invitation was a good opportunity.

The subject of hunting brought them quickly together. They chatted like old friends and they seemed all set to go on for ever.

But at last they reached the valley where their ways parted—Yerbol had to go to the right, and Abai and Karabas to the left, to Kunkeh's aul at the foot of the Chinghis Range.

Abai was reluctant to part from Yerbol.

"Perhaps you are not in such a great hurry to get to Kolgai-nar? Why don't you come with us?" he urged.

"How can I? What shall I say if I'm asked what I have come for?" the other said laughingly.

"No one will ask. You'll stay with us for a time, and we'll go hunting with a falcon."

Yerbol hesitated.

"It is just what I should like." He pondered a little. "No! I can't," he announced decisively. "I have too much to do."

He took his leave and set off for Kolgai-nar, as gay and fresh as he had been when they had met him. This was a young man after Abai's own heart. How he envied him—Yerbol could see Togzhan every day if he wanted to. What luck! And Yerbol probably met her quite casually and thought nothing of it. Yerbol was his last hope, and he was far away. They had just been so close, and now he was gone.

2

They arrived in Karashoky after the midday meal. Kunanbai had evidently summoned a gathering, for many horses, their saddles inlaid with silver, stood tethered before Kunkeh's large tent and the smaller yurta which served as a kitchen. By the animals' brands Karabas knew that all who had arrived dwelt in the immediate neighbourhood.

"They are Irgizbai, Zhuantayak and Topai, the usual gathering," he said, and then added with some bitterness: "Their horses are saddled and they are about to leave. We've missed the dinner!"

Abai entered the yurta and presented his salem. The tent was full. Kunanbai sat beside a high couch, his shoulders towering over the others, the front of his white shirt open to reveal a hairy chest. The guests had already put on their out-door clothes and were finishing their kumys as they listened to the final words of their chief. Some had partly risen, and had paused, half-kneeling, their fur hats on their heads. Kunkeh sat beyond the couch, near the door, and at her side stood old Zhumabai, stirring about and pouring the kumys.

Abai seated himself near them and listened to his father.

"I am told that I am mistaken, that they are not fostering some new enmity. Very well, I shall take note of this; I shall believe that it is so, though this may do me harm." He emphasized the last words with solemnity. "I shall be patient until I see things with my own eyes. And those who are my true friends,"—his one eye swept the company from end to end and fixed on the elders of the Zhuantayak and Topai clans—"let them have patience as I have patience. But be ready! And when I mount my horse, you must be with me. If you act so, you will do right in the sight of God and will find favour with me! I have no other requests, no other demands," he concluded, as if to say, "Those who are ready may go."

There was a general murmur of assent.

"So be it!"

"It shall be as you say!"

Abai thought, "This is just like an oath! Father probably called them together to draw the reins tighter."

Kunanbai had just used the word "friend." Looking round Abai could not help noticing that these men whom his father had styled friends were men he did not know at all or people he knew but slightly. Once his father had numbered among his friends such men as Baisai, Karatai, Bozhei, Suyundik and Tusip. Not one of them was here today. Even Kulinshak, whom Abai had visited so recently, was absent. There was something curious about this. Who were these new friends? And where were the old ones? Was there something new and secretive afoot?

When they had returned from Karkaralinsk, Abai had been confident that the differences and quarrels had ended in the reconciliation sealed by adopting the unfortunate child. He had heard no more rumours or loose

talk and paid little attention to the murmurings among the people.

By now most of the guests had departed, Kunanbai having kept back a handful of the elders. But even in this narrow circle he seemed reserved and tense, and it was difficult for Abai to find an opportunity to tell him about his visit to Suyundik. But at last he was able to make his report to his father, and decided to stay no longer, for he was anxious to get to his mother at Zhidebai. But his father pulled him up.

"Are you a little girl who plays with dolls?" he demanded. "Must you always run to your mother? You seem to get on better with the women than with me. Here you can meet people, listen to wise speech and learn how to live. What can you learn there?"

Privately Abai was not in accord. "While you are my father, she is my mother," he thought. "Sons are brought up by both." But he dared not contradict.

"I have a falcon at home," he explained hesitantly. "There's a lot of game about and I thought I'd do some hunting round Zhidebai."

This seemed reasonable to Kunanbai and he raised no further objection.

"Just stay another day or two. Tomorrow I should like to send you to Baidaly, and after that you can go to Zhidebai."

Abai was pleased and relieved, but as he left the tent he began to ponder.

Kunanbai had first sent him to Kulinshak, with whom he had fallen out, then to Suyundik whose old differences with him were known to all. From neither old men had Abai heard anything commendable about his father. Now he was to be sent to Baidaly, the friend and supporter of Bozhei.

What was the meaning of this, and why was he being sent to see these men? It was clear that Kunanbai was deliberately sending him to those with whom he had

quarrelled. "Let him see that they are my enemies, let him learn to know them better, and he will understand and respect me more!" Probably this was his father's idea.

Was it this or something else? Abai became thoughtful again. What a maze—an impenetrable thicket through which he, Abai, was compelled by an iron will to blunder, helpless and unarmed.

Two days later he and Karabas were once more in the steppes, this time on their way to Baidaly.

Here their reception was not at all like that they had been accorded at Kulinshak's and Suyundik's. There was neither a welcome nor a repast. Scarcely had they crossed the threshold of the enormous yurta when they heard the angry, scolding voice of Baidaly.

The tent was unpleasantly warm, stuffy and in disorder. Just near the door a servant was preparing some sheep cheese and a cauldron stood boiling in the middle of the yurta. Baidaly was raining blows on a little olive-skinned girl.

"Get out of here! You give me no peace, curse you!" He pushed the child away. Frightened, she nearly fell into the fire, and burst into tears.

"Away with this trash! I can't bear the sight of her!" Baidaly cried to his wife, driving the child out of the yurta.

Abai and Karabas entered and presented their salem. Baidaly reciprocated coldly.

When cheese is being made, the cauldron is occupied, a convenient pretext for those who are reluctant to treat their guests to meat. But anyway Abai felt no inclination to stay in this place of noise and disorder. "If there is no repast, so much the better," he thought and secretly laughed at the plight of Karabas, who loved food more than anything in life. The prospect of a good piece of meat for dinner or supper always meant a great deal to him, and frequently when Abai had been anxious

to hurry away from somewhere, Karabas had detained him only because smoked meat was expected for supper.

Black-bearded and grim, their host did not once look at them, but stood glaring at the door. Finally he made a vague gesture to his wife, as if to say, "Shall we give them some kumys?"

Karabas had already loosened his belt and was preparing to seat himself comfortably, but Abai understood his host's sentiments and had no intention of prolonging the visit. The kumys was served, and Baidaly himself stirred it up and poured it.

"Where are you bound for?" he asked finally. "And what is your business?"

Abai at once conveyed his father's message.

It was once again a matter of grazing land. Before departing for zhailyau the previous year Kunanbai had given the Bokenshi the land bordering on Baidaly's pastures in exchange for the grazing grounds taken from them at Karashoky. Now he begged Baidaly to permit the auls of Sugir and Suyundik to avail themselves of his pastures.

When Abai had finished, Baidaly frowned and for a long time said nothing. He fixed the young man with a piercing stare, but Abai was not to be put out of countenance. His expression was one of unaffected surprise, as though asking, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Finally Baidaly gave his answer.

"So be it! Let Suyundik and Sugir set up their auls on my pastures. What more can I say?"

It was the decision of one who was courageous and resolute. He had wasted no time in arguing or pleading, though his heart was obviously filled with fury. Abai finished his kumys, thanked his host and was about to leave when Baidaly spoke again:

"I have agreed to his proposal, but I have something more to say to your father. Will you convey to him exactly what I say?"

"Please speak your mind, aksakal. I promise to repeat your exact words."

Baidaly was impressed.

"If I were to give the message to another, there might be gossip and false rumours. To you I can speak as to your father." Again he was silent and thoughtful.

"Was it not yesterday," he began, "before a large gathering in Karkaralinsk, that we agreed, 'Let there be peace and friendship between us'? But what has our peace come to now? If Kunanbai continues to harass me, then in what way does his peace and friendship differ from bitterness and enmity? How have I offended him? How have the Zhigitek offended your father? Our forefather Kengirbai once blessed your forefather Irgizbai to succeed him as bai after himself. Do you imagine he had no sons of his own? And yet he said, 'Irgizbai shall be at the head.' And now Kunanbai stands above us—he has the power and the glory. Why does he not cease to trample our people underfoot? He gives us no peace—he is constantly urging, 'Into the fire with you! I won't rest until I have my way!' He demands an answer? Then convey these words to him, 'If he does not cease to harass us, sorrow will come upon him.' Tell him that this message is not from me alone, but a salem from the entire Zhigitek. As for the land, let him have it! Not these pastures alone, but all of them!"

Baidaly waved his hand.

The yurta was still now but for the crackling of the fire beneath the cauldron. The long tongues of flame kept licking the great vessel in which the cheese was boiling. The sour milk had thickened, there was a mighty heaving, and great bubbles rose slowly to the surface. As Baidaly spoke, Abai stared at the boiling

mass in fascination. The fury of indignation long suppressed! Just like that mass in the cauldron it was accumulating everywhere and rising to burst at many spots at once. Kulinshak's resentment, Suyundik's bitter words, Bozhei's hatred. And now—Baidaly....

Baidaly's words were restrained, but how many deep wounds they touched! How many bitter thoughts they evoked—and complications! That brief message was the culmination of years of disagreement, reproaches, and irrefutable accusations that could be proved to the hilt....

Abai's features were composed. He would not let Baidaly see whether he sympathized with him or not, and was intent only on hearing and remembering. Reaching for his hunting crop and hat, he was about to take his leave, but Baidaly again moved to speak and Abai put down his things.

Old men know how to preserve their composure and to bury the profoundest thoughts in the hidden, unknown depths of the soul, but this sudden change from storm to calm, this power of self-control was quite new to Abai. Baidaly, who had just previously been on the verge of explosion, suddenly spoke peacefully—even mildly.

"You meet Karatai often? He's a splendid man! It's a pity that he belongs to the poor Kokshe. If he'd been an Irgizbai he'd have climbed high.

"One day," he went on after a moment's silence, "Karatai, Bozhei, Baisal and I were talking, when one of us asked, 'Who is the most generous of all we know?' We thought this over for a time. Baisal lay blinking at the sun like a lynx, and it was Karatai who answered, 'Kunanbai.' Soon there was another question: 'Who is the most eloquent?' Again Karatai answered, 'Kunanbai.' And we asked for a third time, 'Who is the best man among us?' And for the third time it was Karatai who answered, 'Kunanbai!' But Baisal then raised his head from the pillow. 'Now there, you fox! What nonsense are you

talking? Kunanbai's generous, Kunanbai's eloquent, Kunanbai's the best! Then why do we turn up our noses and quarrel with him?' To this Karatai answered promptly, 'Who cares about Kunanbai's vices? Do they trouble us? Not at all. He has all the virtues but one—kindliness! That's why we live in discord.'" Baidaly looked keenly at Abai. "You, I see, are one who knows the value of words. Perhaps your father has never heard of that talk of ours. Tell him about it. Karatai has witnessed his cruelties more than once—many times! And from day to day the Zhigitek also see and realize what sort of a man he is. The words 'I forgive' will, it's clear, not be heard from him to his dying day."

Baidaly relapsed into silence.

On his way back Abai had no wish to halt anywhere. What he had heard was as hard to bear as it was instructive.

"Let's have a race," he proposed, when they were hardly out of the aul.

Karabas was not at all fond of such games, but in any case they had to hurry if they were to reach Karashoky by dusk, and the black mare he rode was no worse than Abai's Aimandai.

"Well then, here we go!" He applied the spurs and darted ahead.

They rode hard for a long time, first one of them leading, then the other, but neither would give way. Karabas would have liked to slacken the pace once he was ahead, but then Abai would be alongside on his Aimandai, shouting, "On, on! Or I'll get ahead!"

"Baidaly has set him aflame, now there's no holding him!" Karabas thought.

Their foam-flecked steeds galloped into Karashoky just before sunset.

There was a rocky hillock beyond the aul, and there Abai saw his father sitting with Maibasars. Springing from the

saddle, he threw the reins to Karabas and hurried to his father.

Kunanbai realized at once that his son had come galloping all the way. The bay reared and tore at the reins, his sides heaving, which was enough for Kunanbai's experienced eye.

But this was not what concerned him. Kunanbai was not petty and never plagued his children with such admonitions as: "Now you've ruined the horse." He did not complain even if their horses went lame or collapsed beneath them. Young people would ride fast, no matter what one told them.

Kunanbai was interested in something else—Abai had not gone home, but had come hurrying up the hill, straight to his father. Kunanbai gazed intently at his son. The young man's eyes were blazing, his cheeks were aflame and his nostrils distended. What a curious change! This was not the usual quiet and reticent Abai.

"What's the matter with you? Why are you so excited? Tell me what has happened?" he demanded as the young man approached.

Surprised to see how well his father understood the state he was in, Abai sat down and related his conversation with Baidaly word for word.

As he spoke he watched his father narrowly. Kunanbai seemed patient enough at first, but at the words, "How have we, the Zhigitek, offended?"—he frowned and stared at his son, as if puzzled: what Abai thought about it all.

His father's steady gaze did not disturb the young man, who not only fully conveyed the resentment of the Zhigitek, but even added some conclusions of his own. The hour had come for the father to face his son.

Abai wound up with the Zhigitek salem, so charged with menace. Kunanbai was still silent, and Abai related the story Baidaly had told about Karatai's words.

"He'll have to speak now," thought Abai. "But what will he say?" Impatiently he waited.

Kunanbai divined his thoughts—he knew that he had to answer not Karatai nor Baidaly, but his son who sat waiting there. He had to answer if only that his son might know the worth of his father's enemies.

"Karatai," he said, "is an experienced horseman. He knows when to ride hard and when to go slow.* Perhaps he is right. But it seems to me that a man's vices may grow out of any number of virtues. Persistence and perseverance, in my opinion, are man's finest qualities. When I begin something, I go on firmly to the bitter end. It is possible that this has been the cause of my mistakes."

He sat silent for a while, ashen-hued.

"A man is but a slave of Allah. And how many are the faults that may be found in a slave?" he continued more calmly.

And Abai suddenly felt that his father really was a man of stature. Albeit indirectly, he had admitted himself to be wrong. In this he was not like Baidaly, who was quick to accuse others but found it hard to recognize his own mistakes. His father had not spoken for the sake of eloquence: his words were fraught with meaning. As it is sometimes difficult to find the path through niggled mountains, so it was difficult to know Kunanbai's heart.

The father had his own aims, his own way—and his son had his. Abai went home, his thoughts in the same hopeless tangle.

3

Before returning to Zhidebai Abai asked his father where they were to spend the summer that year. It appeared that the Great Aul was to wander first, but this time

* An expression which roughly corresponds to: "He knows a thing or two."—Ed.

not in the usual direction. The zhailyau was to be set up beyond the pass, in the Bakanas Valley.

The Bakanas and Baikoshkar were the larger rivers in the pasture grounds of the Tobikty. Formerly Kunanbai's auls had wandered in the summer to Baikoshkar, while Bakanas had belonged to the Kokshe. But now Kunanbai had fallen out with Karatai and was apparently determined to seize his summer pastures.

Other calculations also entered into the matter. The three clans—the Bokenshi, Zhigitek and Kokshe—were preparing to spend the summer together. Baidaly's threat, conveyed through Abai, had been no idle one, and it was clear that he was gathering about him those who were of the same mind as himself. Kunanbai intended to get some of his auls into Zhigitek territory—then each of the stratagems of the Zhigitek, each of their secret moves, would reach his ears at once.

It was most advantageous to send the Great Yurta first, as Zereh's tent was known and revered by all the Tobikty. Besides Ulzhan was hospitable, open-hearted and generous—not at all like Kunkeh. She attracted everyone by her friendliness, she knew how to soften hearts and blunt enmity. Taking everything into consideration Kunanbai ordered the Great Aul to set off for the Bakanas, a place just beyond the mountain pass, and to set up its tents alongside the Bokenshi.

Abai could not fathom his father's secret thoughts. He knew, however, that the wandering of one aul alone, unaccompanied by the others, would be rather difficult—and yet he was overjoyed, for riding along the banks of the Karaul towards Bakanas would bring them near Suyundik's aul. He had been so despondent, fearing that his path would never again cross that of Togzhan and that he would not even come near her again. And now the unaccountable ways of life were again leading him towards her aul!

So sorrowful had his thoughts of Togzhan been of late that he could not conceal his joy, and blushed violently as he heard his father's instructions. Kunanbai noticed this, but said nothing. Abai offered no objections to this strange wandering, but observed that he was not altogether certain that it was a good thing for an aul to wander all by itself.

But Kunanbai had thought it all out.

"You won't be alone. I've ordered no less than ten other auls to follow," he replied.

Having discussed all the details, Abai returned to Zhidebai.

He would meet Togzhan again. He would see her, and more than once perhaps. What a precious, unexpected stroke of good luck! Now his thoughts were only of Togzhan; visions of her crowded into his mind. "My only one! My hope!" he repeated again and again. The words came of their own accord, and seemed to keep time with the hoofs of Aimandai beneath him. Such moments were never to be repeated. This was winged youth, aflame and mad!

Abai rode all the way at a fast trot. Never before had this ride seemed so short, and he did not even notice how he got to his mother's aul.

In Zhidebai everyone had long moved into the yurtas. The Karaul River had overflowed its banks widely that year and the surrounding meadows were covered with lush grass. The numerous white yurtas of the aul seemed so festive that they might have been expecting long-awaited and welcome guests. Flocks of sheep hemmed it in on all sides; lambs were bleating for their mothers and dogs were barking. Everywhere there were people, busy and noisy. Abai reined in before the Great Yurta, greeted his mothers, and gave them his father's instructions. The green grass had appeared early this year on the zhailyau grounds, and the auls in the Chinghis had not troubled to move to the foothills but had at once set

off for the summer pastures. The Great Aul, therefore, must not lag behind.

Ulzhan agreed, her only objection being that she could not move at once, but needed at least five or six days to pack the things and put the winter houses into shape before departure.

Abai was worried. What if Suyundik's aul crossed the mountains first and got so far ahead that it would be impossible to overtake them! And how pleasant it was to wander with the auls of one's friends! To move together and halt together by day and by night! During the zhailyau wandering, it was customary to dwell in the small yurtas, in huts and in light tents. If there were someone whom you loved, you could meet in a tent on a moonlit night! Abai had often heard of such things from the older djiguits.

But his mother's decision was inflexible. In household affairs Ulzhan always did as she chose, not even deferring to Kunanbai. Abai had grudgingly to consent.

During the evening meal he told Zereh and Ulzhan what he had heard about little Kamshat, keeping back nothing and relating all the details. Let them weep and grieve, but he could no longer conceal the fate of the little girl.

Zereh sighed and began to heap angry reproaches upon Kunanbai. Ulzhan sat still for a time and then addressed Abai:

"Say nothing to Aigiz of this. Her heart is already broken. Only this morning she told us that in a dream she had seen Kamshat fall into the fire."

"Suyundik's wife is a real mother," she added after a moment's silence, "kind and loving. She would not say such things without reason. When we reach the Chinghis, take one of the grown men and go to see Kamshat. When we learn all that there is to know, we shall speak to Father. Then we may tell Aigiz."

This proposal met with general approval.

Ten days later Kunanbai's Great Aul crossed the range and settled in the neighbourhood of the Zhigitek and Bokenshi.

Some ten auls had made the journey—just as Kunanbai had foretold. Right until the last day it had been impossible to overtake the wandering Bokenshi and Zhigitek, who had moved from the Chinghis foothills earlier. The Great Aul had evidently travelled more slowly than the others.

From the very first day of their arrival they were showered with presents of meat and kumys, traditional gifts to Zereh as a sign of welcome to the Great Aul. Bevises of women kept slipping into the Great Yurta—no one overlooked old Zereh. Notwithstanding their quarrel with Kunanbai, all the kinsmen in the vicinity came to present their respects, with the exception of Bozhei, Baidaly, Sugir and Suyundik. Everyone who came to Zereh was warmly received, and those who failed to come were tactfully not mentioned.

On the day after their arrival Abai and Gabitkhan went to Bozhei's aul, which lay across the green hill to the west, on the shore of a fresh-water lake. Arriving during the midday meal, Abai at once saw that this was not a prosperous aul—there were only one or two fine new yurtas, the rest being black with age.

At Bozhei's yurta, Abai and Gabitkhan dismounted. They learned that the master was away, visiting a kinsman across the lake.

As they tethered their horses and approached the tent, they heard a feeble wailing—a pitiful sound that could come only from a sick child.

Abai recognized the voice of Kamshat and his heart grew heavy. Rounding the tent, they approached the entrance, to hear a harsh voice scolding the child bitterly. It was Bozhei's baibishe, and her words snapped out sharply, each a painful blow to Abai.

"Now don't howl! You've no cause to screech, you miserable foundling!"

Abai parted the curtain and entered with Gabitkhan. The roomy yurt was richer than its external appearance indicated, and there were many valuables, rich rugs and draperies. But everything was in disorder: the floor had not been swept, the beds were unmade and things lay scattered everywhere. A large dusky-faced woman sat at a spinning-wheel by the bed. Her twitching nostrils and the incessant movement of her lips gave a hint of her shrewish disposition.

The two daughters of Bozhei sat on the floor beyond the bed, busy with embroidery; these overripe maidens, both ugly and clumsy, looked as bad-tempered as their mother.

The wails continued.

Yes, it was Kamshat. She lay on some torn and filthy matting, with the sleeve of an old coat for a pillow. Her wailing was weak and tremulous, a lament at the callousness and cruelty around her.

The once rosy and chubby Kamshat was thin and pale as after a prolonged illness, and her tiny arms and legs were incredibly wasted. Her little face expressed helpless suffering, and her cheeks were hollow. Against her sunken face her eyelashes were more noticeable, giving an impression of having grown longer—she looked like a grown-up who had endured great grief or starvation. She looked quite exhausted, a pitiful neglected child.

Abai and Gabitkhan hurried to her, but Kamshat failed to recognize them and turned away in fright.

Gabitkhan was horrified, and could not control himself.

"Oh, my poor defenceless darling. How you have suffered, you innocent child," he exclaimed, in tears.

Abai's face was ashen, and he shook with rage.

The women hurried to offer absurd, irrelevant explanations.

"The others are well, but not this poor thing—her stomach ails her," began the baibishe in a sugary tone.

"If your belly hurts then your mouth should be empty! But does she understand this? No! The moment she's a little better, she snatches at everything! How can she ever get well! She makes herself ill," echoed the maidens, anxious to display solicitude.

Abai would not speak. The very sight of these women had chilled his heart as soon as he had crossed the threshold.

Bozhei's wife ordered the samovar, but Abai refused tea.

"We shall not drink," he said. "We are going."

How could one think of food with little Kamshat suffering in bondage! "Oh, my own, my very own!" That was the funeral cry for a kinsman. Of what avail was it to weep for a kinsman after death! He had to get out of the tent at once or he would not be able to restrain himself from seizing the child, never to let her go again. "My poor, defenceless darling!" he almost shouted.

Stung by the lying words of Bozhei's daughters, he was ready to scream at them, to pour out all his bitter indignation but wrath choked him. But before these callous creatures it was better to say nothing. It would certainly worsen Kamshat's plight if he did, and might even kill her. He could do nothing.

The baibishe offered him a cup of kumys, but how could he drink? He put the cup down on the floor untouched. Who was he angry with? Whom could he accuse or blame? Was Bozhei's family alone to blame? Of course not! These were Abai's thoughts as he left the yurta.

Never had he been so enraged! It was evening before he got back to his aul, but anger was still gnawing at his heart.

Tethered to the post between the Great Yurta and the Guest Yurta stood Kunanbai's long-backed bay, side by

side with another animal, both of them saddled. It was clear that his father had just arrived. All the better! Abai was determined to share with him the pitiful burden of little Kamshat's wailings. He entered the yurt and sure enough, Kunanbai was there, having made the journey with old Zhumabai.

Aigiz entered the yurt on Abai's heels. Her maternal heart had anticipated some fresh sorrow—some irresistible force had drawn her. She knew that Abai went to visit Bozhei, and no sooner were they across the threshold than she pleaded:

"Abai-zhan! Have you learned anything of your poor little sister?"

Zereh and Ulzhan also turned, waiting for his answer.

Abai looked at his father. Kunanbai sat silent, regarding Aigiz coldly.

"I saw with my own eyes," said the young man. "Kamshat is ill, a hair's breadth from death. She could not recognize us. She is surrounded by strangers, by enemies. . . . What can I say?"

Kunanbai gave him a baleful look, but said nothing.

The women gasped, wept and lamented.

Aigiz grew pale.

"Light of my eyes! My little dove, unhappy child, torn from its mother!" she cried. "Who has cursed the day you were born?"

Kunanbai flung out an arm to command silence, or perhaps to protect himself from the curse of a mother.

Aigiz, who always trembled before him, immediately grew quieter. She continued in whispers, scarcely breathing.

"Stop that or you'll be sorry!" he shouted at her. "To the devil with you and your anger!"

She dared not answer. Ulzhan, however, sitting next to Abai, managed to dry her tears and asked:

"What does this mean? Die of sorrow, but do not cry over the pain? Is that what you want?" Desperately she

continued, "Do you think our grief began today? We have long been weeping for Kamshat. But to whom could we complain? Who would have understood?"

Kunanbai cut her short, but now Zereh was aroused.

"Do not try to put fear into my daughters-in-law!" she demanded authoritatively. She sat up angrily, her hands resting on the floor, and looked her son in the eye. Never had Abai seen his grandmother so formidable.

She continued to stare intently at Kunanbai and the Irgizbai chief finally turned his head away. It was more than he could bear.

"To whom should they bring their grief and their hopes if not to you?" she persisted. "If you want to be cruel, then be so to your enemies! What is the good of your cruelty among friends, in your own family? You may think yourself a God on earth, but it was not from the heavens that you descended. You are the child of common mortals and were born of a mother: it was I who gave birth to you! They too are mothers and wish to share their grief with you. You have delivered up Kamshat to be rent and torn, and to us is left grief and despair. Cease your bellowing—find some means of consolation, some means of mending the evil! Deliver that orphaned child from its tormentors!"

Zereh spoke in an imperious tone.

All were still. Kunanbai himself was speechless with fury. Not for many years had anyone dared to speak to him that way. But the voice of his mother was the voice of his conscience, of justice, and her words were scathing.

"What can I do? Such was the decree of the elders of the clans!" he made an attempt to justify himself.

Abai had long thought of that decree with abhorrence.

"And what a heartless, cruel and inhuman decree it was!" he suddenly burst out. "Is that the way to reconcile people? Can such a decree bring peace to anyone? It can only stir up the dregs of bitterness in the heart.

What are these mothers to think and feel about the Zhigitek who took their child from them by force? What talk can there be of peace when the Zhigitek wanted cattle and instead received a child that requires care and attention? They may be inhuman and callous to value five mares above the life of Kamshat. But what about us who handed over a helpless child like a wretched puppy!"

His father was listening very attentively. This was something new. No one had expressed such ideas before. But one could not argue that way: Abai was not treading the beaten track of centuries, but some unknown path of his own.

"Eh, my son, my stripling! Your heart is right, but you ignore the customs of our people," he exclaimed.

His tone was different now, no longer commanding—he seemed to be willing to discuss the problem that was torturing them all. Though he had called Abai a "stripling," it was obvious that he was weighing up his son's words. His answer, too, showed that he was making a concession to Aigiz and Ulzhan.

"The customs of our forefathers teach otherwise," he said after a pause. "To reconcile those who have quarrelled it is customary to conclude a marriage between the hostile families. The girl is given away as an offering, as a slave and hostage. But we have given away Kamshat for Bozhei to raise as his daughter. Does this mean that we have delivered her to torture? That depends entirely on Bozhei. If he is capable of understanding anything at all, why did he not receive my child as one of his own? If he treats her as a stranger, then he is violating the terms of our agreement and has failed in his duty to us. He may hate me, but can he consider that my child, whom I have taken from her swaddling clothes and handed over to him, is in any way guilty? If he could not impress such a very simple idea on his family, then he is good for nothing."

With these words Kunanbai silenced Bozhei.

After his visit to Bozhei's. Abai had for the first time felt deeply incensed with the Zhigitek leader, in whom he no longer had confidence. "If his wife is so inhuman, then why does he not show her where her duty lies?" he had asked Gabitkhan on the way back.

Kunanbai came to a decision, and on the following day old Zhumabai presented Kunanbai's salem in Bozhei's aul. Aigiz too had sent an aged neighbour to Bozhei's baibishe:

"Tell her she is killing my child. What woman, if she is in her right mind and has a conscience, would do such a thing?"

Zhumabai returned from Bozhei, gloomy and depressed. He related that he had found Bozhei in the company of Baidaly and Tusip. Informed of Aigiz's complaint by his baibishe, Bozhei had conferred with his friends and family, and had sent Kunanbai the following grim reply, "Kunanbai once threw my honour to the flames. Does he think I have recovered from this? That the wound has healed? Has it occurred to him what I had to suffer? He doesn't care if we all burn to ashes as long as his smallest twig is spared! What has Kunanbai lost? Only one little grain that has fallen from his granary. Let him leave me alone—let him not try my patience!"

That was all that Bozhei had had to say to Zhumabai. words full of the old hatred. It seemed that strife and revenge had again raised their heads, once again crying, "Beware, we are still raging!" His last hope destroyed by Bozhei's reply, Abai was deeply troubled.

Where was their pity? The baibishe and her daughters obviously had none—they were stupid and ignorant. But what about Bozhei himself? How could he have sentenced an innocent babe to a lingering death? Such cruelty—and without remorse! Was it only on the surface that Bozhei seemed to be humane, gentle and merciful, as he had seemed when he had endured blows without

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attempting to retaliate. How was he any better than Kunanbai, whom he accused of cruelty?

Kunanbai heard Bozhei's reply without looking up. His face turned grey and his breath came with difficulty. But his habitual morose taciturnity did not leave him. Only to Abai he said bitterly:

"To him my daughter is not a human being, but a wolf cub. His hatred will die only in the grave. If one of my sons fell into his hands, he would put out his eyes or tear him apart! That's clear beyond doubt. Very well, then. I accept the position. I shall wait before striking."

Within a few days came the terrible news that Kamshat had died.

She had died in the morning and was hastily buried in the afternoon of the same day. No one had been informed of her death—neither the aul of Kunanbai nor even her own mother Aigiz. Inhabitants of Ulzhan's aul had learned of it only from a passing herdsman.

All were downcast and bitter—most of all Zereh and Abai. What justification could there have been for such bestial senseless cruelty? Kamshat had been just a small child. Discord and hostility should have had no place where the core of life itself—humanity—was at stake.

Bozhei had apparently realized something of this—when Kamshat had died he had ordered his wife to send word to Aigiz. But Baidaly had convinced him that this was not necessary, with the result that they had buried the child without troubling to summon her kinsfolk.

Ever since Kunanbai had taken the summer pastures from the Zhigitek and given them to the Bokenshi, the two clans, which had always dwelt in peace, had been charged with mutual suspicion and constant resentment. The grazing lands, the pastures by the rivers, all manner of things, gave rise to bitter discord. Baidaly and Tusip could see this well and were constantly troubled by the thought that the discord sown by Kunanbai

might in time lead to a complete breach with the Boken-shi, which would deprive the Zhigitek of their last ally in their struggle against the Irgizbai.

It was his hatred for Kunanbai that had prompted Baidaly to advise the burial of Kamshat without the formality of summoning her kinsmen. Bozhei had fully realized the enormity of this insult to Kunanbai, but had agreed, although he quite foresaw the consequences. His hatred of Kunanbai was too strong to miss so convenient an opportunity for revenge.

Kunanbai was mad with anger when he learned that Kamshat had been buried in such a way. Unhesitatingly, but secretly, he summoned the elders of the Irgizbai, Topai and Zhuantayak, told them of Bozhei's action and left the matter to their judgement.

This time it was not Zhumabai who was sent to speak to the Zhigitek. Instead, Kunanbai sent Izguty and Zhakip, his foster brother and his brother, who had always shared his joys and sorrows.

They wasted no time on pleasantries with Bozhei.

"What have you done?" demanded Izguty. "Was the child a mere slave captured as plunder? Was she not the child of Kunanbai himself? Could you not have told her mother and let her at least have thrown a handful of earth upon the grave? What senseless, stupid revenge!"

In the presence of Baidaly and Tusip Bozhei retorted:

"Of course, Kunanbai is looking for another pretext to kindle hostilities! Did you expect me to proclaim the news far and wide and hold a funeral feast for an infant no bigger than my thumb? And would it have prevented him from hurling himself on me! If I am guilty, let him exact vengeance in blood. Let us see whether he is strong enough!"

The quarrel over the grazing lands had apparently reached its climax. Bozhei's challenge showed that he was ready for anything.

Baidaly and Tusip firmly supported him and no sooner had Izguty departed than they summoned their kinsmen. Their differences with the Bokenshi were forgotten: in the moment of danger all rallied about the Zhigitek.

And on the very evening that Kunanbai addressed his allies and gave his blessing for a renewal of hostilities, Baisai, Karatai, Suyundik and others in Bozhei's aul likewise firmly resolved to fight and sealed their decision with an oath to the Zhigitek leader.

It was early summer and many auls which had just crossed the Chinghis were beginning to set up their yurtas. Both sides now hastened their preparations for the wandering, in order to reach the summer pastures on the banks of the Bakanas and Baikoshkar rivers as soon as possible. The season promised to be a stormy one. Both Irgizbai and Zhigitek were preparing for struggle, covert and otherwise.

The large auls of the Tobikty moved quickly, the soeels and shokpars held constantly at the ready, and the horses chosen for riding in the summer were kept without food after dark so that they remained in good form.

The flames of anger and of enmity spread wider. Anxiety and fear stalked from aul to aul. There were vague rumours of sudden attacks, violence and death, and the people—both Irgizbai and Zhigitek—slept warily, ever tense and expectant.

In that troubled time of tension Zereh's aul travelled night and day until it reached the Bakanas River. Within a day it was surrounded not by ten but by forty auls. From early morning until late at night the yurtas of Ulzhan and Aigiz were crowded with armed men.

During the wandering Kunanbai had travelled constantly with the Great Aul, summoning the elders, issuing orders and instructions. Having arrived at Bakanas, he gathered together all the beys, elders and messengers. In the thirty or forty auls in his immediate vicinity there were extraordinary assemblies which met not to choose

new officials and elders, to honour the memory of the dead, hold races, or to celebrate weddings, but for no apparent reason at all. Finally these vast gatherings came to be a daily occurrence.

Abai knew nothing of his father's plans. Kunanbai was constantly in the company of the old men and was virtually unapproachable. Abai spent his days with his mothers, sharing their grief.

The Zhigitek, Bokenshi and Kotibak had been expected to settle on their summer grounds, which lay near the Bakanas. For some reason, however, they failed to appear, and it turned out that they had remained behind, somewhere near the pass. It was usual for warring sides to overtake or harass one another on the way, and at the outset it had seemed that the Zhigitek meant to repeat these traditional manoeuvres. What had happened to them? Why had they fallen behind? What were they up to? No one could find a satisfactory answer.

And suddenly there came the astonishing tidings that Bozhei had been gravely ill for the past five days, and that his illness had taken a turn for the worse the day before. Perhaps he had felt that the end was near, or perhaps for some other reason, he had gathered his kinsmen about him on the evening before and had taken leave of them. Those newly arrived at Bakanas related that they had heard this with their own ears.

The auls of the Irgizbai and their allies along the Bakanas, which had been living in daily expectation of stormy events, of sudden attacks and violence, could now talk of nothing but Bozhei's illness.

On the next day there came the chilling news of Bozhei's death. He had breathed his last the previous evening.

It was Zhumabai who brought the news, as Ulzhan, Kunanbai and Zereh were sitting over their morning tea with Abai, Ospan and Takezhan. The entire company was dumbstricken.

Kunanbai sat pale and pensive, his one eye peering through the door at the distant green hills. Silently he moved his lips in prayer.

Zereh was bowed down with sorrow, and a heavy sigh escaped her as the tears gathered in her eyes.

Abai's heart was rent with pain.

The auls of the Irgizbai waited patiently for the messenger who must appear to inform them of the death of the Zhigitek leader. According to custom a fast rider should have dashed to their auls to invite them to the funeral.

No matter how bitter the enmities of daily life there was a saying which could not be denied: "All must give way before a splendid feast or a fresh grave." No matter what had happened when Bozhei was alive, not a single kinsman must be missing from his funeral, each single one must lament his passing with the others.

Large quantities of kumys were accordingly prepared; fattened horses were set aside for slaughter; the yurtas were folded away and there was talk of starting without waiting for an invitation. The messenger was awaited until the very evening, but no one came.

It was incredible: Kunanbai had not been invited to the funeral, a deliberate slight to him and his aul.

Whether Bozhei himself had so decreed before his death or whether his kinsmen Baidaly, Baisal and Tusip had thus decided was a matter of conjecture. To Kunanbai it was the very worst of insults. Fratricidal strife, suppressed for a while but not extinguished, had raised its head again and now menaced him across the body of a dead man. Not only had Bozhei's nearest kin been invited, but even the most distant auls of the numerous Tobikty people. None had been forgotten but Kunanbai.

At first disconsolate, Kunanbai was soon once more filled with anger, with an inflexible and consuming hatred. It was impossible to seek revenge upon a dead man, but he was determined to make Baidaly and Baisal pay for

his humiliation, which was unprecedented among the Tobikty.

Kunanbai knew that there could be no question of open hostilities for the time and issued fresh instructions to all the auls along the Bakanas as well as to the aul of Ulzhan: "See to your household affairs and fear nothing!" Accompanied by Zhumabai, who had newly arrived in Baikoshkar, he then departed for the aul of Kunkeh.

The auls which from day to day had been expecting an armed clash now grew calm as life took its normal course. Who would dare to mount a horse to attack his neighbours on days overshadowed by death?

Zereh and Ulzhan were very sad at not having received an invitation to attend Bozhei's funeral, but there was nothing to be done. Humiliated and grieved, they could not hold back their tears. For a week they had been baking the customary funeral cakes and now, sitting before a cloth spread with the traditional mourning dishes, they listened to Abai and Gabitkhan reading the prayers they themselves would have liked to repeat over the grave of Bozhei.

The Zhigitek, Bokenshi and Kotibak were preparing for an elaborate funeral. Their numerous auls were filled with visitors—men and women, old and young—who had come to mourn for Bozhei. Everywhere there were cries of sorrow, weeping and wailing. The kinsmen, friends and close associates of Bozhei had arrived with their yurtas, servants and offerings of fattened cattle. Such a funeral had not been seen for a long time.

The death of Bozhei had interrupted the journey of the auls to their distant summer pastures, where they had to live until autumn, and it was decided that they should stay where they were for the prescribed forty days, to make welcome all who had come to lament with them and to observe the customary funeral ceremonies of the seventh and fortieth days.

Bozhei had not suffered long. He had been struck down suddenly, never to recover, and it had been obvious from the first that he was doomed. By the third day the stamp of death had been clearly visible—he was tossing about feverishly and could find no peace.

Baisai had seen other men die. He laid his hand upon Bozhei's breast, felt the feeble beating of the heart and knew that the end was near. Baidaly, Tusip and Suyundik sat by, waiting for Bozhei's last words. One evening Baisai had begun to speak in hushed tones, saying:

"His illness is a cold, a thing that can strike down any man. If he'd sweat well but once, he'd recover."

Suddenly they saw that Bozhei was frowning and gritting his teeth, his yellowed features darkened with rage. He gathered what was left of his ebbing strength and began to speak vehemently, jerking out his words, now loudly, now scarcely audibly as he gasped for breath.

"A sudden blow.... From where? From without ... or from within, where the snake has been eating at my heart? What does it matter now? There'll be more room for Kunanbai.... I can see that I am to go from this world.... I'll no longer stand in his path.... I'll go.... But you? What lies ahead of you?"

Of Bozhei's four friends only Suyundik burst into tears. The others sat very still, dark and hunched.

These were Bozhei's last words. Within a few hours he was gone.

Though their leader had died in the evening, the four old men, and their wives and children continued to lament late into the night. Baisai received all the visitors to the yurta with tears in his eyes, and at last he swayed and fell to the ground. Baidaly, Tusip and Suyundik took him from the crowded yurta, laid him gently down and knelt at his side. Baidaly was the first to speak:

"If tears alone could bring him back! But have we not wept enough? See yonder!" And he gestured towards

the aul, to the groups of men and women lamenting and wailing. He heaved a sigh more like a moan, but continued firmly: "Pull yourself together, Baisal! Let us be stronger of spirit and discuss what has to be done for the funeral."

Several other elders were summoned to the council, and Baidaly's first measure was to decree that none of the auls of Kunanbai be invited to the funeral.

By midnight forty riders were ready to carry the tidings far and wide. Mounted on the best horses they darted off in all directions---to the auls of the far-flung Tobikty, to the neighbouring territories of the Kerei, to the settlements of the Mamai and even to the most remote of the tribes roaming near Karkaralinsk.

Baidaly and the other elders did not sleep throughout that night, and at daybreak the largest yurta in the district, Suyundik's octagonal tent, was set up beside the yurta of Bozhei. It did not have the customary furnishings, but the floor was covered with carpets as always. A large couch handsomely ornamented with bone and covered with a black rug stood to the right of the entrance. This was where the body of Bozhei was to lie until the end of the funeral ceremonies.

As the deceased was carried from his yurta, the lamentings of his daughters and the other women grew louder than ever. When the body had been placed on the couch Baidaly with his own hands set up the flag of mourning on the right side of the tent. This was the greatest mark of reverence, the banner of sorrow flown from the point of a spear. Had Bozhei been a descendant of the khans, the banner would have been different: the white or blue, or the striped flag of the nobility. But the banner for a man from among the common people depended upon his age. Baidaly had consulted Suyundik, who was renowned for his knowledge of custom, and Suyundik had explained that for a young man the banner should be red,

and for an old man, white. Bozhei, a man of middle age, would require a banner of two colours—black and white.

The fact that Baidaly had set up the flag on the right side of the mourning yurta on the next day after Bozhei's death, indicated that the memory of the deceased would be honoured with particular solemnity, that the ceremonies would be repeated at intervals for no less than a year and would conclude with a memorial repast.

In accordance with another custom two horses were led from opposite sides towards the entrance of the mourning yurta and tethered to the door-frame after general prayers were said. One of them was a large animal with a finely arched neck, the well-fed dark bay Bozhei had ridden during the winter, and the other a handsome dark grey that had been his mount early that summer.

At the sight of these animals which reminded them of the living Bozhei, a man they had all revered, the crowd burst into fresh laments. Some stood sobbing as they leaned on their staffs, while others fell to their knees and bowed their heads to the ground.

"Oh, Bozhei, unequalled among men! Our lion! Our brave and faithful lion!"

Baidaly was the first to recover his self-possession and approached the bay tethered to the right side of the door-jamb.

"Ah, priceless zhanuar," he exclaimed. "Your master has passed away. You stand orphaned and alone." And he cut a tuft of hair from over the eyes of the animal. Then he gathered its flowing tail, let it rustle over his knife and also cut it to knee-length. The dark grey was similarly treated, and then both horses were released to rejoin the drove. They would be fattened for a year and then slaughtered and eaten at the funeral repast in memory of their master.

Baidaly gazed after the animals as they went off.

The dark grey had a black mane and tail and would serve well as a horse of mourning. During the wander-

ings it would carry its master's saddle shrouded in black.

Beneath the mourning banner the elders also decided just what cattle and what property should be assigned for the funeral.

"Death empties the rich man's bag and strips bare the poor man's back!" Bozhei had not been rich. But he had not been poor either. How could he—with such kinsmen and friends! And those who had shared all with him when he was alive would not desert him now. How could they forget him when the grass had not yet grown over his grave?

Though unexpressed, these were the thoughts in everyone's mind.

Bozhei's kinsmen took all the arrangements for the funeral upon themselves. The family of the Zhigitek chief was not to be deprived of even a goat. For a year, every hungry, tired and homeless traveller, whether a near or distant kinsman, or an utter stranger, would find shelter and rest in Bozhei's home. Their gratitude and prayers would undoubtedly augment Bozhei's happiness in the other world.

On the same morning the council resolved that the mourning tent should be decorated with the most precious and beautiful of ornaments. Suyundik, Baisal and Baidaly contributed rich carpets and cloaks, brightly patterned felt rugs and other valuables.

Within the tent sat Bozhei's baibishe, almost prostrate with grief. Her pale, sallow features were framed in a white kerchief, which did not keep the black hair from flowing wildly on to her shoulders. Throbbing blue veins stood out in her worn and bloodless face. The wounds she had clawed on her cheeks in the first paroxysms of grief were still fresh.

Bozhei's two daughters had discarded their maidens' caps for black shawls. From the moment of their father's

death they had wailed a dismal lament which greeted all who came to pay their last respects.

Great throngs of visitors kept pouring in from the broad valleys, the distant summer camps and mountain ravines beyond the Chinghis. The earth shook with the thunder of hoofs. The wailing and lamenting hovered over the aul for several days on end.

Bozhei's body was not interred on the summer grounds, but was carried across the Chinghis to his winter quarters at Tokpambet.

Of all the Tobikty only Kunanbai was absent from the funeral.

At the Foothills

I

IT WAS long before the hour of noon, but the stifling heat of the day was unbearable. In the skies there was not so much as a scrap of cloud. Nor had there been a drop of rain throughout that scorching, paralyzing summer when the earth lay gaping in parched fissures. But the Bakanas was a copious river and its banks were richly clothed in shrubbery, wild acacias, feather-grass and wormwood, and for that reason the auls were anxious to spend the summer here. If not for that oppressive heat, there were no better pastures anywhere!

His face streaming with perspiration, Abai emerged from the yurta, but saw little to cheer him.

The people of the aul were barely able to move about under that relentless sun. The huge, mottled, yellow cur lying before the Great Yurta yawned widely. He was panting heavily, his tongue hanging out.

The droves had left the pastures and were herded together on the bleak crest of a distant hill, whence they had been driven by the tireless and vicious gadflies. The sheep returning from the meadows wallowed

limply in the mud at the side of the river. The cows had waded into the water and stood dozing, only their heads showing above the water. The few calves left on the bank were rushing frantically to and fro, trying to shake off the gad-flies. With lashing tails, distended nostrils and bulging eyes they dashed about, as if to escape slaughter.

The tunduks of the yurtas were down, while the lower felt sections were everywhere raised.

Abai could not think where to find relief. For a long time he stood dazed, then yawned and ambled towards the river. From the tip of his nose drops of perspiration rolled down his face, his head ached and he was ready to curse the Bakanas and its sweltering heat.

The boys had invaded the river and the noisiest of them were Ospan and Smagul. Abai plunged in some distance away. After swimming twice across the wide Bakanas he was cool and cheerful, and he began to dive like a porpoise. Ospan came closer, watching with delight and envy.

"Do it again! Just once!" he cried slapping himself on the hips. Suddenly the imp sprang on to Smagul's back. Smagul struggled desperately to shake him off.

"If the cropped necks* can't shake me off, you won't either! Just kick about and try!" Ospan rode triumphantly, clutching Smagul by the neck, digging his heels into the other's ribs as though spurring on a pony.

Smagul gave up the struggle. Obediently carrying Ospan he ran to the spot where Abai was bathing and plopped into the water, rider and all.

Abai had long tired of Ospan's pranks. Two years before he would not have minded a gambol with his young brother, but the restless youngster had become a nuisance, and now, whenever the little rascal pestered him, he

* Two-year-old colts. The manes of the two-year-olds were cropped.—Ed.

shooed him away. He waded ashore, dressed unhurriedly and prepared to go home.

But at the water's edge, he saw suddenly Takezhan mounted and ornately dressed, a real djiguit, with a falcon on his wrist. His black-maned bay was prancing about covered with foam and straining at the bit.

Two wild ducks and a spotted varnavka hung from his saddle. At the sight of the game, the children flung themselves at him, each trying to outshriek the other:

"Eh, agatai,* give them to me!"

"No! To me! To me!"

Takezhan usually surrendered his game to the children, but first liked to have them plead and humble themselves in every way. The youngsters were used to this and continued to wheedle.

Takezhan regarded Abai with a somewhat smug smile. He always tried to emphasize his superiority over his brother. Was not he, Takezhan, a full-grown djiguit who could hunt with a falcon? What was Abai compared to him—a mere stripling of a boy! This very summer, Takezhan had called upon his betrothed. He had friends among the real djiguits, and was he not grown up enough to lie in wait for the girls in the bushes? No, Abai was far beneath him.

Ospan and Smagul continued to harry Takezhan, who retorted with sneers and coarse words, of which he was overfond. Quiet as a mouse in the presence of his father, he would swear furiously the moment the latter was out of sight—at the children, the shepherds and the labourers. It had become a habit with him. At last he untied the fowls and handed them to the boys saying:

"Instead of muddying the river, you dirty-faces ought to be out picking berries!" To this he added several of his choicest epithets.

"Berries? Where?" Smagul wanted to know.

* Affectionate term for elder brother.—*Ed.*

The children always picked berries in the summer, but there were none to be found along the Bakanas. Abai, too, was curious. While out hunting, Takezhan explained, he had heard someone say that there were plenty of berries along the neighbouring river beyond the hill.

The boys scurried about noisily.

"Let's go right now!"

"Catch the horses, somebody!"

Takezhan decided to go with them. The two elder brothers gathered the children and rode off, followed by a swarm of small riders mounted singly and in pairs.

Ospan rode somewhat behind. Disregarding the advice of the herdsman who urged him to pick a gentler horse, he chose a two-year-old grey that was just being broken that day.

This animal had long fascinated the boy. Tall and graceful, it had never known the restraint of a bit. It had been foaled and reared by a wild mare which no one had been able to milk for as long as a year. In its second year, too, the young grey continued to draw its mother's milk and seemed to have inherited a generous portion of her wildness. From the moment he had seen this beauty, Ospan would not stop harassing the djiguit Masakbai, who could ride even the wildest horses. That morning, at last, Masakbai had noosed the rearing grey.

The colt proved both wild and vicious. Performing the most incredible leaps to free himself of the unaccustomed burden, he struck out with his hind hoofs or sprang high, or reared, his back arched crazily. Twice he tossed Masakbai into the dust—never before had anything like this happened—and the djiguit was furious, determined to break the animal at all cost. He clutched at the ears of the colt, half strangled him with the noose, forced the bit into his mouth, finally managed to get a rug over his back in place of a saddle, and remounted. Blows raining down on him, the two-year-old dashed off at a frenzied pace. When the colt was exhausted and ap-

parently subdued Masakbai returned to Ospan, who had been watching him with huge enjoyment. Unhesitating, the boy leaped on to the grey himself. The animal was tired, but by no means broken, and instinctively balked at such a light and insignificant rider. Rearing again, he struck out in all directions but failed to throw off the boy, who at last quietened the animal again, as he later boasted to Smagul.

The others had all set off, but Ospan was delayed because of the colt's tricks: once again the animal hurled himself from side to side, writhed, turned and kicked. Ospan held fast, showering him with blows and grinning broadly. Unable to rid himself of his tormentor, the grey dashed madly forward—just the thing Ospan had been waiting for. As he lashed the animal lustily he screamed all over the steppes, "Aruakh! Aruakh!" The other children, who had ridden far ahead, were swiftly overtaken, but the grey showed no signs of weakening. Rushing on, heedless of the reins, he suddenly pranced sideways and ran squarely into Takezhan's horse.

The children scattered in all directions. Ospan managed to turn his grey to ride on, but the colt had other ideas. His head flung high, he whinnied frantically, took several erratic leaps and again began to do battle, rearing or hunching his body like a cat.

Abai was at first afraid for Ospan, but then noticed his face and was surprised. There was not a sign of fear in those flashing eyes. The boy was utterly unafraid and thrilled by the fight, and it looked as though he wanted the horse to oppose him as long as it could. This was no mere foolhardy child, but an experienced fighter engaged in bitter struggle. And as the horse bucked and reared frantically in its desperate attempts to get free, Ospan anticipated and curbed its every movement.

They all watched spell-bound; only Takezhan expressed his delight, clicking his tongue and uttering his usual coarse comments.

"Hard as stone," he said. "Nothing can get him down." Spurring his bay, he rode on.

The children turned to follow, but the wild grey plunged ahead of them all. Ospan continued to shower him with blows shouting in ecstasy, "Aruakh! Aruakh! Masakbail! Masakbail!" as though to charm the colt with the name of the man who had first subdued him.

On the hillside they spent much time picking berries, the sweet fragrance of wild strawberries rising from the grass all round. The day was fading and the shadows of the hummocks were growing longer. Cool breezes swept the ravines and gullies, but it seemed as though there were enough strawberries for the children to go on picking for ever. They ate their fill and stuffed their caps and hats, their bags and pockets.

Suddenly there was a strange rumbling sound from the other side of the hill, as of steppes afire or a great army on the march. The boys stood still, glancing questioningly at Takezhan and Abai.

A huge drove of horses appeared on the crest of the hill and began to descend into the valley. Snorting and neighing the white and grey animals moved steadily on. Foals and colts whinnied, and breaking away from the drove, the colts raced playfully about over the grass. The horses on which the children had arrived grew restive. Their ears pricked up and, hobbled as they were, they made clumsy attempts to join the oncoming herd. The children flew to head them off.

In this deserted spot a drove like that could only herald the approach of a wandering aul, and when the children had remounted they were not surprised to see the first of the nomads silhouetted against the sky.

Fifteen camels strode at the head of the procession, followed by a lengthy winding chain of groups of eight, ten or fifteen camels. Then came riders armed with soeels and shopars. Here and there a djiguit carried a hooded eagle.

But the caravan that emerged behind the riders astonished them all.

It was surrounded by numerous women on horseback, girls and women of all ages, richly attired and mounted on superb mounts whose saddles, reins and breast ornaments blazed with silver. An even row of girls on horseback led a saddled dark grey with cropped mane and tail. Then followed a thin, pale, elderly woman dressed in black. The packs of all the fifteen camels of this group were covered with black rugs, dark embroidered cloths and many carpets with black designs on coloured grounds.

The boys dared not cross the path of this magnificently solemn and mournful procession, and had no alternative but to sit still on their horses, burning with curiosity.

As the girls of the front row approached they seemed to confer with one another and then altered their formation—two of them moved forward, leading the saddled dark grey by the reins.

Ospan came closer to Abai.

"Who are they? What does it all mean?" He fidgeted in his saddle and prodded his elder brother in the side with his whip. Suddenly he began to laugh, "My goodness! Look at their hats. Abai! Look at them!"

Abai turned upon him angrily:

"Be quiet!"

The sight that had set Ospan off was equally strange to Abai.

Both he and Takezhan had realized that this was Bozhei's funeral train. Obviously the saddle and the red cloak carried by the cropped horse had belonged to its dead master. Bozhei's riding-whip was fastened upright to the front pommel of the saddle, and upon it hung his fox-fur hat. But most extraordinary was the appearance of the two girls who rode in front. Each of them wore a man's hat of fine black lambskin and dark velvet. The most curious thing, however, was not that they were wearing such hats,

but that they were wearing them backwards, so that their faces were completely covered by the elongated flaps which usually served to protect the neck.

When they noticed that a company was waiting to let them pass, the two girls raised the funeral lament. The five behind aligned their rank and joined in the singing. It was customary for the girls of a wandering aul in mourning to sing these laments whenever they passed a settlement or some unknown travellers.

But what did Ospan care about old customs? As far as he could remember no one had died at home and it would have been quite useless to explain the meaning of such a procession to him. He would not even have understood. Everything seemed absurd to him and he could not help laughing. Afraid of Abai, he did not raise his head, but his shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

Abai glanced at the girls and froze, his left hand thrust through the thong of his riding-whip and raised high, as though he were about to cry, "Stay, if only for a moment!" But not a sound escaped his lips. Pale and barely able to breathe, he let his hand sink again on to the mane of his horse.

The central one of the five girls riding by was Togzhan, whom Abai had not seen since their first meeting in the spring. She sat on a white pacer with a silken mane.

The folds of her black satin cape rustled softly with every movement. Her head was graced with a new cap of home-spun silk and a filmy shawl around her neck fluttered like gossamer. Large golden earrings swayed lazily from the lobes of her ears. Surrounded by girls of her own age, she shone like the morning star in the dimly lit heavens. Her hands resting on the yellow sash girdling the black satin, she rode slowly on, looking straight ahead and singing the lament, the song of death. Her clear, open brow, the soft lines of her white skin, and the waves of hair cascading darkly down her back

merged in his sight to produce a vision of pure, unearthly loveliness that touched his heart.

Abai watched her unblinkingly, no longer breathing. He listened to the lament—to the high, soaring voice. Was it Togzhan or one of the other girls singing? But such a voice, he felt, could come from no other.

For an instant he could see nothing. The lowering skies seemed to have suddenly parted to reveal the moonbeam, dazzling in its still beauty. For an instant he lost his senses. He bowed his head to this glorious vision, the like of which he had never before seen or heard of.

But it was only for an instant. Then this scene which set his mind in a whirl gave rise to a new and painful emotion.

The lament of Togzhan, the weeping of Bozhei's daughters, the funeral procession, the mourning colours, the riderless horse with the cropped mane and tail, all expressed the sorrow of an entire clan. They had not invited Kunanbai to the funeral, had not forgiven him, had not let him share their grief, the general sorrow. This procession in which his Togzhan was the most brilliant gem had passed him coldly by, as though to say, "Away with you and your cruel father. It is not for you to look upon us!"

The lament of his beloved, the mourning for Bozhei, a close kinsman taken by death, was like a reproach to him as well. "Am I to blame?" He would have liked to vindicate himself, but his sadness overwhelmed him. Downcast, he saw nothing and heard nothing but the melancholy melody of death.

Someone prodded him in the back, "Let us go!" Abai turned swiftly startled from his trance. It was Takezhan frowning and jeering:

"What are you snivelling for?"

Abai shivered and passed the back of his hand over his cheek. He was surprised to find his face bathed in tears.

The mourning train had moved on and there was a large break between it and the rest of the caravan. The

children spurred their horses to follow Takezhan. Ospan snatched a hat from one of the other boys, put it on backwards and shaking with laughter, lashed his horse.

He had forgotten, however, that he was sitting on the wild grey and had struck without first gripping firmly with his legs. The wild horse lunged and before Ospan could tighten the reins he found himself on the ground. But the boy did not lose his head. Rolling away from the hoofs, he continued to hold the reins and, rising swiftly, jerked hard. Rosy with laughter he sprang upon the tall grey as though nothing had happened, and at once let fly a rain of blows. The two-year-old leapt ahead, followed by the horses of the other children.

Takezhan and Abai fell behind. Takezhan continued to play the grown-up as usual.

"What's the matter with you? Do you call yourself a man? What were you snivelling about?"

Abai grew angry:

"You're quite the grown-up, aren't you? But you've no more sense than a child! Was Bozhei a stranger? You should have been weeping with the rest."

"We? Why should we weep?... They did not even invite us to the funeral!"

"It was the living who did not invite you, not the dead. Why blame the dead?"

"Why blame him? Of course I blame him. He was on bad terms with Father."

"And who is to blame for that?" Abai asked. "You seem to know everything—just who is right and who is wrong?"

"Whether I do or whether I don't, I side with Father! His friends are my friends, and his enemies my enemies."

"Do you really think it takes much wisdom for the cub to run with the wolf?"

"Don't talk nonsense! You seem to think there's no one wiser than Grandmother—almost feeble-minded with age!"

"And you side with Father. Have you acquired much wisdom from him?"

"What do you mean? You seem to think me a fool!" Takezhan swore viciously.

"There you go again! You seem to have grown up only for cursing. A fine grown-up you are! All one hears from you is vile swearing at the shepherds, the milkmaids and the labourers!"

"And you think you're a brave fellow, don't you? Wait till I tell Father about this."

"Tell him whatever you like, but I'll tell Grandmother just what you said about her being feeble-minded."

Takezhan did not answer. He always dodged a serious encounter—he lacked the determination. His father was far away and who could tell whose side he would take. Grandmother, it was true, rarely grew angry, but when she did, she was dangerous. In the spring Takezhan had insulted a woman of his aul with coarse words, and the results had been most painful. When the woman had gone weeping and complaining to Zereh and Ulzhan, Grandmother had flown into a rage, summoned Takezhan and given him a sound beating. And, worse luck, this had happened just as Takezhan, a real grown-up djiguit, was preparing to call upon his betrothed.

As he argued with Abai all this flashed through his mind, and he suddenly became anxious to put an end to the quarrel somehow.

"Stop it, can't you?" he pleaded and, with another string of oaths, lashed his horse and darted away.

Glad to be rid of him, Abai continued to ride at a walking pace.

"It doesn't take much wisdom for the cub to run with the wolf." He had uttered these words in the heat of the quarrel, but only now did he grasp their full import. Anyone could follow the beaten track, the path, mapped out by their fathers! If one were only strong, and could

find one's own way. . . . Lost in thought, Abai barely noticed when he reached the Bakanas.

No sooner did Zereh and Ulzhan learn from Abai that Bozhei's aul had come to its summer grounds than they hastily dispatched a messenger to Kunanbai. "The aul of mourning is quite near," said their message. "If we do not go there now, then how shall we afterwards look people in the eye? Let Kunanbai quickly decide what to do."

And Kunanbai made his decision. Accompanied by Kunkeh, ten elders and djiguits he arrived in Bakanas on the same evening. The twenty neighbouring auls then prepared supplies of kumys, and slaughtered the fattened cattle.

They set off by noon the next day, some fifty men, about forty women and a small group of boys, among them Abai, Takezhan and Ospan. Only Zereh and Ulzhan rode in the cart with one other old woman known to everyone as Sary-apa. On Kunanbai's instructions the cart had set off ahead of the riders.

Kunanbai was accompanied by his brothers, Maibasara and Zhakip, his nearest kinsmen and the elders of the clans which had sided with him: the Zhuantayak, Karabatir, Topai and Torgai. Kunkeh, Aigiz, the younger mother Tonsholpan and others rode behind. The party moved behind the Aga-Sultan in small groups.

Approaching the mourning aul the entire crowd of them dashed down the slope with cries and shrieks ringing over the steppes.

According to an old custom all who came to an aul or settlement during a funeral were obliged to arrive at a gallop, crying, "Oh, my own, my very own!" The elders had to begin, and those behind watched for the signal. Kunanbai and those with him dashed off howling and weeping, and the others followed.

Abai rode in the central group. Next to him galloped his eldest brother Kudaiberdy, son of Kunkeh, the

messenger Zhumagul and old Zhumabai. Behind them rode Takezhan, Ospan and others.

"Oi-bai, my own, my very own! My brother! My rock of hope, my only support," they cried on all sides of Abai.

Zhumagul and Takezhan rocked to and fro in their saddles as though they would fall off at any moment. To look at them one might have thought they were dying of grief, but Abai was not deceived.

He too voiced the funeral cry, but with him there was no need to simulate grief, and Kudaiberdy at his side was as sincere as himself. Abai had always been fond of this brother though they had met but rarely, and now he decided to stay near him throughout the ceremony.

Zereh's cart had already arrived at the Great Yurta of Bozhei, which towered over the other tents in the heart of the aul. The white funeral yurta stood apart, the black-and-white banner fluttering from a tall staff.

As they topped the hill before the aul, Kunanbai and his party discerned the flag of mourning and swept towards it like the flood waters of spring. On they came, shouting and lamenting. Abai could see some thirty men before the white yurta, weeping as they leaned on their white staffs. These were Bozhei's kinsmen, preparing to meet the guests.

The riders dismounted. The group before the tent was headed by Baidaly, Baisal, Tusip and Karasha. Other relatives behind them also leaned on their white staffs, sobbing.

Swift agile djiguits swarmed forward to meet the guests, helped them to dismount, tethered their horses, and then led them to the elders. Instead of the usual greetings the guests embraced their hosts and wept with them. When he saw how Baidaly, Baisal and the other elders were weeping, Abai could no longer restrain himself, and as he dismounted, he began sobbing. And thus lamenting and weeping, all were led into the Great Yurta where the sorrowful moaning went on incessantly.

The Great Yurta was crowded with women. Sitting in rows from the front door to the places of honour, they rocked to and fro with their hands on their hips as they chanted the funeral cry. The very loudest and most desperate of the mourners was Bozhei's baibishe in the centre. She sat all but hidden beneath a black shawl, the tears flowing from her eyes in an unending stream. Five girls sitting near lamented as bitterly as she, and it seemed that the great dome of the yurta could scarcely contain all that grief.

As they entered the yurta, the men knelt before the women, embraced them and wept.

Abai followed closely behind Kudaiberdy and embraced all who were near him, finding it impossible to do these honours to everyone. Kudaiberdy, the tears streaming down his face, first embraced the baibishe of Bozhei, sobbing violently.

"Aga-ekem, my very own," he moaned.

Abai, too, approached her first and then turned to the girls who sat a little further away.

At last the prolonged and lengthy general lamenting was over. Only the baibishe carried on while the five girls sobbed over her words. The baibishe bemoaned her irretrievable loss, bewailing the cruelty of fate, moving the heart of everyone in the yurta. Gradually, she too grew quiet.

But the two daughters of Bozhei would not cease. Their lament had now become a dirge, the two of them singing as one. Pronouncing every word very distinctly they broke off now and then to sigh or moan in unison, but always resuming:

"Oh, father!... Had you but waited until we were grown! You have left us as orphans and alone.... To whose care?... Why have you left us to bitter tears?" And the listeners could not help sobbing again.

To Abai these moments were the hardest.

The girls' lament gradually turned on their father's life, becoming a song of his bravery, honour and good deeds. Their voices grew more and more plaintive.

But it was not only of Bozhei that they sang; they recalled all who had surrounded him, mentioned all his contemporaries, and suddenly came upon the name of Kunanbai.

The Great Yurta grew very still.

Kunanbai sat silent, his hat pushed down over his brow, his head bowed. The girls' lament was like a blow in the face.

But according to custom no one dared interrupt a lament: it was as sacred as the Holy Writ itself. No one could silence or curb it, for it stood above the law. And the words grew ever sharper:

*Kunanbai became our foe,
For the wrong gave us a child.
Kunanbai is now our foe,
Fiercer than the kulan* wild,
Deadlier than a serpent's wiles!*

The merciless voices scourged Kunanbai cruelly—as if striking him squarely in his single eye.

The old men who sat about him grew numb, fearful of an outburst. They coughed, blew their noses and stirred uneasily. But Kunanbai gritted his teeth and kept quiet.

Abai hung his head, too ashamed to breathe. Long before, when the baibishe had just begun her lament, he had noticed Togzhan among the girls. Her face was covered and he had only a side view of her. "If only the earth would swallow us," he thought, "it would be better than to endure such a disgrace."

Someone nearby suddenly clicked a tongue. Abai raised his head; it was Sary-apa. Frowning, she arose, walked

* Kulan—wild horse.—Ed.

to the centre of the yurta, kneeled as she pulled the black cape over her head and began a song of her own.

At first she sang only of Bozhei, lamented his death, but finally added:

*Oh daughters, have you no shame
That the mem'ry of evil you keep?
All honoured your father's name—
Why in secret then lay him to sleep?*

She sang these words loudly and clearly and was then silent.

Nothing could have expressed the feelings of the warring camps better than these two laments from the women. There was nothing more to say. Gabitkhan, who had been sitting at Zereh's side, began to chant the Koran in the sing-song Bokhara manner. All sat very still, listening.

Thus Kunanbai paid his last respects to Bozhei.

When the chanting was over, the women were left to themselves as the men retired to another tent for the repast. Everyone, including the revered elders of the aul, Baidaly and Tusip, waited on the guests. But the tea, the kumys and the meat failed to break the ice between Bozhei's kinsmen and the guests. When Baidaly and Kunanbai exchanged remarks, the words were far too polite and carefully chosen. Baidaly himself offered tea to Kunanbai and showed him every attention; but the moment they tried to speak, the same frigid politeness stole between them, and there was nothing to say to each other.

A few remarks were exchanged about the condition of the cattle and the fodder that year, about the skirmishes between the Kerei and Naiman and how they had pillaged one another. But nothing more. The guests departed on the same evening—quiet and subdued.

But Kunanbai felt as though a great burden had fallen from him.

Once at home, at Kunkeh's, he sat still for a time, and finally said emphatically:

"Sary-apa shall be respected and honoured by all!"

2

Autumn had set in. It had been drizzling for three days. The auls had returned across the Chinghis from their summer grounds, stored hay for the winter and lost no time in making straight for the autumn pastures.

Many auls had gathered in the meadows of Zhidebai and nearby places. They had flooded the wide Chinghis valleys, the foothills and the ravines.

The big summer tents had already been dismantled and packed away. The auls had smaller but warmer yurtas, and each tried to make his home as warm as possible, fires being kindled in the tents and the walls lined with felt. The small yurta made of felt alone, which was not harmed by smoke, was the best in this season.

The sheep were no longer milked—the surest sign that the summer grounds had been left behind and that the auls had moved to the autumn pastures. The lambs grew big and grazed with the sheep.

The men, mostly riding about from aul to aul to gossip or wrangle, now looked quite different from before. The cold nights and the mud had compelled them to put on high boots, felt stockings and lambskin coats. Their horses too were different. Those which had been used in the summer had grown lean and were turned out to graze with the droves.

The men rode the horses that had rested all summer—they rode at a walking pace to avoid overriding, and the fat racers were often left to rest over night without food.

Autumn was a busy season, a time when horses were bought, exchanged or borrowed. If the season promised to be one of worries and restless activity or of difficult

journeying and much riding, the demand for strong, dependable horses was even greater, and they were begged, wangled and even extorted by constant harassing of their owners.

It was on a business such as this that one evening Maibasar and Kudaiberdy, hunched over their horses in the rain, were riding to the aul of Kulinshak, the elder of the Torgai people. They were accompanied by Zhumbai and Zhumagul. All four rode quickly, anxious to reach their destination as soon as possible.

In Kulinshak's aul they were obviously expected. No sooner did the four of them appear in the meadows of the aul than Kulinshak rose from where he sat on the hillside.

"Here they come," he said to his "bes-kaska."

"They're riding fast," added Tursinbai, his eldest son.

"We're in for it, Manas. Ride to Pusharbai. We must let him know. There won't be time to warn everybody. Let Pusharbai pass the word to the other Kotibak," ordered Kulinshak.

"And the others can tell the Zhigitek and Bokenshi," suggested Tursinbai.

"Tell them that if they really intend to help me get away, they must come at once!"

"Let them come tonight if they intend to keep their word," urged the other sons of Kulinshak.

Manas heard the instructions of his father and elder brothers in silence. He was to leave at once, but he stood for a while yet watching the oncoming riders.

When Maibasar and his companions reached Kulinshak's yurt, the latter had already descended from the hillside. He greeted them curtly and ushered the unwelcome company into the Great Yurta.

Manas immediately sprang upon his horse and rode off to Karaul. When he saw Maibasar, he understood that there was no time to lose.

Maibasar's demeanour as he entered the yurt was plainly ominous. He removed neither belt nor hat. Pale,

his nostrils twitching, he stood, arms akimbo, without releasing his riding-whip, and glared at Kulinshak and his sons with loathing and contempt.

"What's this I hear, kinsmen? You thrashed my messenger? If he did wrong, why didn't you complain to the Mirza? Or were you anxious to show how strong you are? Wasn't it only yesterday that you stood with us? What do you want? Speak up! The Mirza has sent me expressly so that you may lodge your complaint. He has sent his son Kudaiberdy too, as you see."

Maibasar spat into the smoldering embers and turned to Kulinshak.

Kulinshak sat on a bed made up on the floor. Kulinshak's sons had lowered their heads as though they had heard nothing. Only Kadirbai, sitting near his father, did not avert his gaze but boldly returned Maibasar's stare.

For some moments Kulinshak sat still, his eyes closed.

"You say that we have thrashed your messenger," he began. "But why, noble Maibasar, do you say nothing of your own actions? If the Mirza is so attentive, then why does he not turn his attention upon those who come to plunder? Why doesn't he attend to you?"

"Don't waste words, aksakal! I have come here to determine just who is to blame and to see that such things are not repeated."

"In other words, you suggest that I'd better keep quiet? But what if I've decided to break away from you and join those who need me?"

"But who will agree to that, eh? Who will let you go? The Mirza asks you to stay. He promises to look into everything himself."

"God be with him! But let him not be offended with me or rebuke me, if I go the way I choose."

"But why? What has happened, aksakal?" interjected Kudaiberdy. "This is what Father says, 'If he wanders off, he'll set the entire Torgai people against me. We'd better talk things over together and find out who's to blame."

Let him name a place where we can discuss it. Let him say what he needs, let him receive compensation. But tell him not to break away from us. He should not join my enemies!" This is what Father asks of you!"

Before Kulinshak could answer Maibasar broke in:

"Just what do you accuse me of? It was you who thrashed my messenger," he persisted.

"My sons who stand before you have only one good pacer. When you demanded the animal I explained that I could not give it up. Was that so difficult to understand? And yet you sent your messenger, a cur more vicious than a wolf, to take the horse by force. You've tried to rob the aul. Where is the justice of that, Maibasar?"

"It wasn't I who demanded the horse, but the Mirza. Kudaiberdy here took a fancy to the animal and I thought: this is the first time that the boy has reached for the mane of a horse—I'll have to help him. Kulinshak won't be angry over a little prank. That is why I sent the messenger."

"A prank! What sort of a prank was that?" exclaimed Tursinbai, the eldest of Kulinshak's mighty sons.

"Are you trying to pull the wool over our eyes? That was no prank, but plain violence, the sort of thing one does to strangers, slaves and those who cannot help themselves," spoke Kadirbai, the third son of Kulinshak.

It was impossible to come to terms and sullen silence ensued. Then Maibasar again began to reproach Kulinshak for his intended desertion to the Zhigitek.

The message which Kunanbai had sent with Maibasar and Kudaiberdy had concerned this matter alone. All the talk about the pacer and the thrashing of the messenger had been added as an afterthought: Maibasar had meant to bluff Kulinshak, but the latter was not at all inclined to admit himself at fault.

Enraged some days before by Maibasar's attempt to seize the horse, Kulinshak had thrashed the messenger and firmly resolved to break with Kunanbai. He had sent

a rider to the Zhigitek, begging them to accept him into their clan and help him get away. Rumours of this had reached Kunanbai only that morning. To let so close a clan as the Torgai slip away seemed to him a disgrace and a severe loss.

There had been no open clashes throughout the summer after Bozhei's death, but both sides had done all they could to enlist friends and allies. Though concealed and repressed, hostility was growing more and more intense. Hatred and anger on both sides had reached the point when an outburst was imminent.

The fight at Tokpambet, which had ended in the scandalous thrashing of Bozhei, had been the last major clash. Since then the Zhigitek, Kotibak and Bokenshi had been preparing to fight back, determined to settle scores with Kunanbai. On the face of it there had been peace since the death of Bozhei, but it was an illusory calm. Actually, far from being healed, the wounds had deepened. Bozhei's death had rallied the ranks of Kunanbai's opponents and strengthened their determination. And the most implacable were Bozhei's closest friends: Baidaly, Baisai, Karatai, Tusip and Suyundik.

Kunanbai had coveted the ill-starred horse at the wrong moment. At any other time Kulinshak would have yielded the animal, not having the temerity to refuse. But now he had allies—Baisai and Pusharbai had more than once promised the protection of the Kotibak. Kulinshak saw his chance and refused to give in.

Maibasar had failed to grasp the new situation. "He won't let me have that horse," he had thought. "What's this nonsense! What are we worth if we cannot take what we like even from the Torgai? And what can he answer if we do?"

Kulinshak's refusal to give him the animal had infuriated Maibasar and he had resorted to force, prompting the Torgai to break with the Irgizbai and join the Zhigitek and Kotibak.

Maibasars now did his best to dissuade Kulinshak, but his arguments were ignored. Finally Maibasars lost his temper and by sheer force of habit attempted to resort to menace as of old.

"Now, Kulinshak-aksakal, I have brought you the Mirza's request not to leave. And I too ask you to stay. I have said everything and do not intend to go on talking. Give me your word that you will stay. Otherwise you'll rue this day!"

Kulinshak looked at Maibasars with anger.

"So that's that? Very well then, I'll say nothing more either. I have seen and endured enough. Here is my answer: I shall leave!" His tone was final.

Maibasars's companions grew uneasy and regarded each other questioningly.

Explosively Maibasars brought his whip down on Kulinshak's bed. He was choking with rage.

"I know to whom you intend to go! I know who are lurking you away. No doubt they made promises to you: 'We'll protect you! Don't be afraid!' Let them try to take you out of my hands. Baidaly and Baisal throw out their chests and think they are big and strong! Very well, we shall see! I shall live to plant a spear in the backsides of those mirzas!" Maibasars was shaking from head to foot, and his eyes gleamed evilly. "They shall pay for this. They shall pay with their naked backs! They'll remember Tokpambet!"

Kadirbai, the most excitable and bellicose of the five sons, could not control himself.

"Enough of that, honourable volost chief, enough! Such shameful happenings as at Tokpambet are better not remembered." He too was breathing heavily.

Suddenly Pusharbai entered with two djiguits, the same Pusharbai who in Tokpambet the year before had tried to shield Bozhei and had tasted Kunanbai's whip. He was a bearded man, huge and bold. He had not forgotten the

injury, and it was thanks to him that Baisal and the Kotibak had left Kunanbai to join the Zhigitek.

The moment he entered, Kulinshak's sons stirred and grew tense as though expecting something. More footsteps were heard outside. "Who can that be?" thought Zhumabai. "What is afoot?" He looked at Maibasars inquiringly.

"Is anyone at home?" called a voice beyond the door.

"I'm here," shouted Pusharbai.

Ten djiguits burst into the tent, headed by Manas. His brothers, who had been waiting impatiently for them, hurled themselves upon Maibasars and his three companions.

"Get away," roared the volost chief, trying to strike out with his whip before he had even risen to his feet. But Kadirbai grappled with him, threw him flat and sat on his chest. The other three were similarly treated.

What happened then was far worse than the thrashing received by Maibasars's messenger.

Pusharbai, Kadirbai and Manas hammered at Maibasars until they were breathless. The same treatment was meted out to the others, except for Kudaiberdy, who had been protected by Kulinshak. He had dragged the youth aside and covered him with the folds of his garment. Suddenly the djiguits, who had been beating Maibasars without uttering a word, shouted together, "Take him out of the yurt! Let's drag him out!"

Kadirbai was filled with malicious joy as they dragged Maibasars out.

"He was threatening us, saying he'd tear our clothes off! He can only talk, but we'll show him how it's done. Strip him bare, strip everything off!" Seizing Maibasars, he dragged off his cape, boots and trousers. His fist described a great arc as it crashed upon the naked back. He fell upon Maibasars and kicked him savagely. "What haven't you done to us!" gasped Kadirbai at every kick. "Where did you get your insolence? I'll disgrace you even more!"

He rolled Maibasars over.

"Did you say you'd plant a spear in our backsides, eh? Did you, now? Well, then here is your spear!" And with the toe of his boot he jammed a heap of camel dung that lay near the yurta into Maibasars's backside. "If you've a speck of honour left, you'll die of shame," and he gave him another kick.

Having humiliated Kunanbai's brother and his son, the aul of Kulinshak set off to join its new allies that very night. No sooner was the settlement in motion than it was surrounded by a convoy of honour made up of Zhigitek and Kotibak, summoned by Manas. Many of the Torgai auls went over to the Zhigitek that night.

Only when the Torgai were far on the way did Maibasars and his companions get free. It was sunrise by the time they found their horses, and noon before they came to Kunanbai. As it happened, all Kunanbai's supporters were then gathered in Zhidebai, and the auls of the Irgizbai, Topai, Zhuantayak and Karabatir packed the steppes closely for ten miles around.

"The Zhigitek have thrashed and dishonoured Maibasars and Kudaiberdy! They have carried off Kulinshak's aul by force!" So the news flew from aul to aul.

Kunanbai gave urgent orders and one hundred and fifty djiguits were on horseback in a twinkling. They were led by Kunanbai, his foster brother Izguty and his nephew Akberdy.

At noon Kunanbai, who had not once lost sight of the moving Zhigitek, gave a fresh order:

"They're fond of raids and plunder. Let them have a taste of it themselves. Attack them and hold that Zhigitek caravan over there!"

Unhesitating, he led his men against a large caravan passing through the Musakul Valley. The riders descended upon the travellers suddenly and wildly, without a thought as to whom they were assaulting, Kunanbai having been

too enraged to think things out clearly. "It is a Zhigitek caravan, and that's enough!"

It was indeed a Zhigitek caravan, but it was the caravan which carried Bozhei's funeral yurt.

Kunanbai's force struck at the herds in the vanguard, quickly scattered the men and made off with the horses and cattle. The Irgizbai had intended to capture the caravan as well, but Zhakip and Izguty, who rode in advance, recognized the caravan as Bozhei's, and held the riders back. The two daughters of Bozhei continued their dismal chant, leading the riderless cropped pacer as though oblivious to their surroundings. It was only Bozhei's baibishe who reined her horse, stopped the camels and addressed the attackers:

"Ugh! You shameless ones! You have fallen upon a funeral caravan! May you howl in your graves, you godless dogs!"

When he learned that this was Bozhei's caravan, Kunanbai at once changed his orders:

"Leave that caravan alone! Just let them stop and set up their yurtas where they stand."

Bozhei's caravan huddled together and began to set up its tents in the valley as Kunanbai's force withdrew.

The news quickly reached the auls of the Zhigitek: "Kunanbai has attacked the funeral caravan of Bozhei! He has desecrated the memory of Bozhei!"

The Zhigitek were busy with their weapons and other equipment all night. Every man of them took to horse and came to Bozhei's aul. At last Baisal decided that the time had come to strike, and rallied the forces of the Kotibak. Suyundik mustered the Bokenshi.

Throughout that same night Kunanbai's supporters poured into Zhidebai. Musakul, a valley which lay less than three miles away, was to be the scene of a battle. Kunanbai not only collected his supporters from the neighbouring clans, but dispatched his messengers with spare horses to the most distant branches of the Tobikty.

Baidaly and Baisai did the same, sending their messengers to the auls of Karatai of the Kokshe and the numerous branches of the Mirza and Mamai tribes.

As a precaution, Baidaly took yet another step. Grievances and petitions were drawn up against Kunanbai, and sealed by the various clans, complaining that Kunanbai, the Aga-Sultan and ruler, had pillaged the auls and attacked a mourning caravan, that he had embroiled the people of the Tobikty in fratricide. All this was done with dispatch. Baidaly then entrusted the petitions to Tusip's care, gave him five djiguits and stuffed his pockets with money. Leading several spare horses, the group set off for Karkaralinsk.

Baidaly could now serenely await the battle.

At the grey of dawn Kunanbai's forces swept forward with battle-cries and a roll of drums.

Baidaly, Baisai and Suyundik mounted at once and summoned their men. The horses of the Zhigitek stood saddled and ready; soeels and shokpars were quickly seized and within a few moments Kunanbai's riders met their opponents head on. Great clouds of dust arose as the Irgizbai and Zhigitek hit out mercilessly at one another.

This fray, which was later known as the Battle of Musakul, was to be remembered by the Tobikty for a long time. More than a thousand riders fought on each side. Kunanbai enjoyed no superiority of numbers, and his attacks were inevitably repelled. Ten or fifteen men were wounded at every onslaught, and were immediately removed from the field.

The first day of hard fighting was indecisive, the tide of fortune turning first this way and then that, and after dark both Zhigitek and Irgizbai withdrew their forces.

On the second day there was again bitter fighting, but again neither side could gain the upper hand.

The amazing battle was raging for a third day when Kunanbai ordered one hundred and fifty of his best djiguits to be mounted on picked horses and armed with

pole-axes and sharp spears instead of soeels. Infuriated by the grim resistance and courage of the Zhigitek, Kunanbai was determined to crush them, regardless of means.

He decided to set a trap for the enemy. Having thrown in several detachments armed only with soeels, he began to withdraw them at the height of the fighting, to simulate a retreat, hoping that this would bring forward the best djiguits of his opponents.

The stratagem was successful. Valiant groups of Zhigitek and Kotibak horsemen soon emerged to pursue their retreating enemies, among them all five of Kulinshak's mighty sons, as well as Pusharbai and Karekeh. Hot on the heels of the Irgizbai, they steadily pushed forward to the hill where Kunanbai stood watching. This was what he had been waiting for. Suddenly bringing forward the contingent of djiguits armed with pole-axes and spears, he plunged into the thick of the fight with them.

Led by Izguty, they cut through the enemy ranks, put them to flight and began pursuit. Ten djiguits who tried to hold their ground were cut down on the spot. Izguty himself fell upon Pusharbai with a pole-axe, but when Karekeh flew to the old man's assistance, he turned upon the younger man. The pole-axe descended with frightful force. Karekeh dodged to save his head, but the weapon struck off his nose. The blood gushing from his face, he fell from his galloping horse before Pusharbai's eyes. His friends could not carry him away—they were hard put to it to save themselves.

The battle had reached the point generally designated by the words: "The enemy has fled."

Kunanbai was tearing ahead in hot pursuit when a great cloud of dust arose behind the positions of the Zhigitek. The broad shoulder of the hill seemed to be teeming with fresh riders.

The Irgizbai scouts had previously reported, "The Zhigitek have sent a messenger to the Konir people. Mamai fighting men are expected too." To Kunanbai it

was clear that the arrival of the Mamai would give the Zhigitek the upper hand. This had indeed been the greatest danger. And now, at the very moment when he had put the enemy to flight, the Mamai had come. Izguttu and his detachment wavered and reined their horses. Judging by that cloud of dust there were no less than five hundred fresh riders deploying over the ridge.

Kunanbai's forces rolled back, but the Zhigitek, curiously enough, showed no inclination to pursue them. The embattled clans separated at the very moment when one would have expected the fighting to develop to its highest pitch.

It did not occur to Kunanbai that he, too, had been utterly deluded. Baidaly had also resorted to a cunning stratagem. It was he who had spread the rumours of Konir and Mamai reinforcements, and had ordered the nearest of the auls to gather their camels and drive them over the hillside, raising as much dust as they could. The formidable horde which had daunted Kunanbai's warriors had been nothing but a drove of camels.

Not suspecting this, Kunanbai had fallen back, and Baidaly, for his part, had not cared to risk pursuit.

Such was the outcome of the three-day Battle of Musakul; Kunanbai had failed to defeat his opponents, while the Zhigitek had proved their ability to repel the Aga-Sultan and defend their rights with arms in hand.

The battle was over, but endless rumours, half-truths, differing accounts, heated arguments and stories without number filled the air, spreading like the smoke from a huge fire to envelop the whole area.

As for Baidaly and his friends, their voices now rang with confidence; they seemed to have grown taller in stature and become more impressive. Kunanbai's supporters, on the other hand, were reserved and silent, the very nature of their brooding fury showing that they had suffered defeat.

What was to be done? How was Kunanbai to exact obedience from those who would dare to oppose him arms in hand and measure their strength against his? The thought gave Kunanbai no rest.

Then followed ten days of quiet and calm. Kunanbai's enemies were jubilant. "The fort of Kunanbai has fallen; his strength has been shaken," they kept repeating over and over. Feast followed upon feast and neither horses nor sheep were spared. Prayers of thanks were offered up. New friendships sprang up and amid the general merry-making new marriages and betrothals were celebrated.

The Zhigitek had another cause for rejoicing. No more than ten days after Tusip's departure, fifteen armed Cossacks arrived from Karkaralinsk. By that time, too, Tusip had returned, and it was generally supposed that the chief administrator had arrived with an armed force to cross-examine Kunanbai.

The detachment really did include Chernov, an official who had been sent by the Corps. Ten yurtas were set up for them between Zhidebai and Musakul. Chernov conducted investigations for three days and from the outset adopted a very stern attitude in his dealings with Kunanbai. Although he did not say so, it was evident that he regarded Kunanbai's removal from the post of Aga-Sultan as a foregone conclusion. Everyone could see that he was not treating the Irgizbai leader with any special deference. The Zhigitek, Bokenshi, Borsak and Kotibak hastened to make the best of this and inundated the official with grievances.

Kunanbai's supporters were not to be outdone, however, and retaliated in kind: "They have been killing people, pillaging the auls and burning the pastures!" The wildest complaints were lodged against the elders of the Zhigitek and their allies. Elaborate statements were written to prove that Kunanbai had been fighting for justice and that the true culprits were now seeking revenge in slander.

The official reserved his conclusions. Having heard both sides, he told Kunanbai on the third evening:

"You will come to Karkaralinsk with us. We leave early in the morning. See that you are ready."

This augured no good.

When he left the official's tent, Kunanbai urgently summoned ten of his closest friends and kinsmen. Among the elder men were Izguty, Zhakip and Maibasars, and among the younger Kudaiberdy and Abai.

Kunanbai himself presided over the council and spoke of the impending danger. Some of the men went to pieces and looked on the verge of tears, but Kunanbai had no patience with them.

"There's nothing to cry about! If you can, give me your advice. Help me."

Eloquence was of no avail at a time when practical action was needed. No useful advice was forthcoming, however, and Kunanbai realized the helplessness of his friends.

"The matter is to come up before the authorities and the evil now lies in the papers," he said. "Papers, as you know, have never respected a man's honour, good name or high rank. You must try to stop those complaints trickling in, prevent them from dogging my heels. Spare nothing, but stop the flow!"

But just what was to be done was more than any of these indecisive and unimaginative kinsmen of his could think of. There was no one capable of offering a solution. Abai was astonished at the dumb helplessness of these men who surrounded his father. Never before had he ventured to say anything or offer advice, but now he decided to speak his mind.

"To stop the complaints it's necessary to gain the favour of those with whom you've quarrelled."

His father regarded him austere:

"Do you suggest that I should prostrate myself at their feet?"

"No, why? But you could return what you've taken from them and make good their losses. Nothing else will silence them."

Kunanbai understood this very well, but eager to hear the opinions of the others, he made no answer.

Abai's suggestion found general approval. But although when it came to the point they were forced to the same conclusion, they were afraid to open their mouths. Only Izguty was bold enough to say:

"All of them, the Zhigitek, Bokenshi and Kotibak, think only of pastures and winter grounds. Let us try to share the land with them. What else can we do?"

This was tantamount to admitting one's guilt to the Zhigitek, and was a bitter blow to Kunanbai's pride. His helplessness infuriated him, but outwardly he was cool and composed. There was no other way. "If land and cattle are what they need, let them have it and be quiet!" he thought. "What can one do? Fate is merciless and imposes cruel humiliations."

Dismissing the others, he retained only Zhakip, Maibasars and Izguty to consult them as to the best way of opening negotiations with the Zhigitek.

To placate the enemy was no easy matter. He could not go to Baidaly himself; that would have been more than humiliating—a disgrace not to be wiped out. On the other hand, those stupid kinsmen of his were good for nothing. Kunanbai foresaw their helplessness and himself named the men who should serve as mediators.

One of the first was Baigulak, the most respected of the younger men. The second was Karatai of the Kokshe. He, it is true, had quarrelled with Kunanbai, but had refused to join the Zhigitek. Kunanbai therefore desired his salem to be conveyed to Karatai: "We shall meet again if we live. All things may happen in life—enmity as well as friendship. May the day of our meeting be a happy one! That is all I desire!"

On the next day Kunanbai quietly took leave of his friends, children and wives and set off on his journey to Karkaralinsk. He was accompanied only by five djiguits, the most dependable of whom was Mirzakhan, who had served Kunanbai from boyhood and had grown so attached to the Irgizbai leader that he would have readily given his life for him. He was the only man upon whom Kunanbai could fully rely at a critical moment.

Just what awaited the proud Mirza no one knew. Would he be removed from his post or would he continue as Aga-Sultan? One thing was certain, however: the despotic ruler who had terrorized and looted the auls was now compelled to journey to the district town against his will.

Great rejoicing broke out anew among the Zhigitek, Bokenshi and Kotibak, who celebrated riotously for days on end as though this were a long awaited holiday. Both old and young took part in the festivities and games. For the time being their successful struggle against Kunanbai seemed to have welded the three clans into one, and they felt themselves kinsmen whose hearts beat in unison.

"He will never come back," they exulted. "We'll drive him into exile, ruin him with our complaints and avenge Bozheil!"

Fresh grievances and complaints were drawn up and Tusip was again to be sent to the district centre.

At the height of these preparations Baigulak and Karatai appeared, and after prolonged negotiations and discussions they were at last able to stem the flow of complaints. Baidaly spoke for the Zhigitek and at him, therefore, Karatai directed his eloquence.

"If you intend to stop at nothing, we shall not approve," he declared. "We are neutral in this matter. Kunanbai has now to pay for his obstinacy, and here's your chance to recover everything. Take land from him in exchange for the losses suffered by your people!"

The talks continued for three days. Karatai's proposal was hotly discussed and finally accepted.

Baidaly laid down his conditions. He demanded the return of fifteen winter places which Kunanbai had taken from his neighbours one by one in the past, either by cunning or by force. Each of the four clans—the Zhigitek, Bokenshi, Kotibak and Torgai—was to receive several pastures and winter grounds.

As it turned out, the land fell only to the most prominent of the elders and the rich auls. They had talked about "making good the losses sustained by the entire people" and land "for the benefit of the people," but the result was that the pastures and the winter grounds went only to Baidaly, Baisal, Suyundik and their friends. The other auls were placated by presents of fattened cattle, the temporary use of horses or smaller gifts of calves. Yet the burden of this debt was not borne by Kunanbai and his rich elders alone, but by the whole of the Irgizbai people.

The clans made peace ten days after Kunanbai's departure. Complaints were no longer sent in. Having received much land and cattle, the heads of the clans exulted in their victory and during the celebrations distributed gifts of cattle to their nearest kinsmen. Innumerable lambs were slaughtered as sacrifices to the Almighty and to spirits of ancestors who had aided the clans so well in their grim struggle. Large gatherings, celebrations with races, games and songs continued for a long time. The general rejoicing expressed a new confidence—good times had come to stay.

3

When hostilities had ceased and life had returned to normal, the auls left Zhidebai and Musakul and moved down the slopes towards the autumn pastures.

It was unusually cold for the season. There were icy winds, drizzling rains and lowering skies. And when the

breath of winter came so early, it was best to be near the winter homes. Ulzhan was worried about her aged mother-in-law and the children, and decided to reach Osembai in three laps, to shear the sheep there and to move on at once to her winter home.

Abai had visited no one since his father's departure, but he had heard of the celebrations and rejoicing among the Zhigitek. He also knew that the fifteen winter places given up by his clan had passed into the possession of a few of the elders. Soon there was more news: these same elders had failed to divide the newly gained land peacefully. There had been arguments and finally quarrels. This did not surprise him—he had seen a good deal that year.

"The people are suffering. They are groaning under an unbearable burden. They need land!" Such had been the talk of the elders previously. Why then had they not shared the land with the people? They had fought for the honour of Bozhei, but what was it worth if it could be traded for land and winter places? Abai pondered, filled with shame for the elders. He had seen for himself that the wrangling and bad feeling had continued only until the leaders of the clans had managed to fill their bellies. The moment their avarice was gratified everything else was forgotten.

That autumn Abai at last understood the truth about the bai and the aksakal, a truth they took such pains to conceal. Formerly, when they had referred to his father as a tyrant, he had believed that they were sincerely thinking of the people. "Kunanbai is robbing the poor; he has seized their land and left them in tears," had been their plaint in the past. But now, when power was in their hands, they were robbing the people even more, instead of restoring to them what Kunanbai had taken. Kunanbai's booty had merely been divided between five little Kunanbais. They had fought Kunanbai for Bozhei's honour, and having defeated Kunanbai had traded it for winter places.

Abai now realized that the people had been deluded and he with them. "A raven will never peck out the eyes of a raven"—and in this saying it was clear that the people had such "protectors" in mind. The real defender of the people would never spring from among those elders who one day were against Kunanbai and the next day with him. He would come from people of quite another sort.

After returning from riding one evening, he visited his mothers as usual and in the presence of Gabitkhan, Tazekzhan, Ospan and several of the herdsmen took up his dombra. He played with especial spirit and finally sang a song bristling with sly allusions to Baidaly and Baisal, who had at last recovered the land and immediately fallen out over it.

The song evoked praise and laughter.

"Whose song is it?" asked Ulzhan.

"Baikokshe's," answered Abai calmly. "It was he who composed it." The akyn Baikokshe had once visited them in the company of Barlas.

All autumn, and especially after they had settled in their winter homes, Abai more and more frequently sought to express his feelings and thoughts by playing on the dombra melodious *kyuis** and songs. He met old dombra players who had performed before such famous musicians as Bitkenbai and Tattimbet. While improving his own playing, Abai often sang humorous and satirical songs which he always ascribed to Baikokshe.

In the winter home Abai again pored over his books for many hours. His imagination fired by the verses of Babur, Navoi and Allayar, he reached for paper and pencil and began to write verses in an attempt to emulate them.

Love and lovers was the theme that fascinated him now. He had not experienced in real life those feelings he knew so well from books. Love had neither whispered her sweet words to him nor disclosed a single one of her

* *Kyuis*—songs without words played on the dombra.—*Ed.*

secrets, but he longed for love with all his heart, and he knew that love was calling. And his memory was stirred by the liveliness of one who had won his heart for all time. Togzhan—so far away, separated from him by gory battlefields and hate-maddened skirmishes. What mountains and chasms lay between them now! How often had Abai thought of her! All those timid, tender songs from the heart, everything he composed that winter, were devoted to her. In the course of the season he wrote a small collection of songs which he called "First Melodies—To Your Radiant Image." And at last he found the words to complete that verse he had composed so long ago: Thy dawn is in my heart, my love. At times he sang these songs to Takezhan and Gabitkhan as he plucked gently at his dombra.

On rare occasions he would go hunting with his sandy-coloured, black-jowled dog. Once or twice he visited his brother Kudaiberdy in Kunkeh's aul at Karashoky. Kudaiberdy had married young—his fourth son was born that winter.

Kunkeh's aul was the first to hear news of Kunanbai. As this had formerly been the seat of the Aga-Sultan and many auls of the Irgizbai and other clans stood nearby on the slopes of the Chinghis, fresh tidings always reached Kunkeh first. When his grandmother and mother were especially worried over his father, Abai would go to Karashoky to find out whether there was any news.

During these visits he had often to listen to the unjust rebukes of Kunkeh. From the time that Kunanbai had left, she did not cease to abuse Ulzhan even in the presence of Abai.

"Ulzhan has probably forgotten the Mirza! If she were really worried over him, she would gather his kinsmen and friends, and keep the Great Yurta constantly filled with guests! But no, her aul wanders on its own and now, too, she stays in Zhidebai alone. What does she care about her husband? She thinks only of herself. We have to bear

all the worries and expense. She has shifted the entire burden on to our shoulders!"

It was true that Ulzhan rarely invited the atkaminers, whereas in Karashoky, surrounded by many auls, Kunkeh's yurta was naturally thronged with guests. Whether she would or no, Kunkeh had to have much of the cattle slaughtered to feed the visitors. As the expense mounted, Kunkeh grew increasingly irritable, complaining about Ulzhan more and more in the presence of her kinsmen, her neighbours, the old men and even the children.

Abai made no answer to her vituperations, but listened dispassionately and tried to forget what she had said as quickly as he could. Kudaiberdy neither supported nor repeated the malicious gossip of his mother and always welcomed Abai as a very dear friend.

Nor did Abai ever convey Kunkeh's words to Ulzhan. After every trip to Karashoky he sought a convenient moment when his grandmother was alone and had a long talk with her. Kunkeh's complaints did not impress the old woman.

"Pay no attention," she said. "Each of us will manage without her advice. It is the rival in her that is speaking. Do you think that such as Kunkeh and Aigiz will ever keep quiet? Say nothing to your mother about this and I'll do the rest!"

Zereh was as good as her word. Summoning Izguty she sent him to Kunkeh with a stern piece of advice: "She'd better stop gossiping and minister to the needs of the kinsmen and friends of her husband. Enough of her chatter!"

They waited a long time for Kunanbai to return. Baidaly, Baisal and their friends had long settled in the fifteen winter places they had received from him, which had once been the source of such bitter controversy. The autumn had passed imperceptibly and half the winter was gone, but still Kunanbai had not returned. Every month he sent a djiguit to order that more fattened cattle be

brought to him, to convey his instructions and report the state of his health and his affairs.

From all his messages only one thing was clear: he had been deposed from the aga-sultanship the moment he had arrived in Karkaralinsk. Would he manage to settle his affairs soon? Who could say? Investigations were officially underway and he was not permitted to go home. Such was the brief substance of his messages.

In Karkaralinsk a new Aga-Sultan had been chosen—Kusbek, a descendant of Tyure Bokei. Kusbek had once been Aga-Sultan before, but had been compelled to relinquish the post. Back in authority, he was unfriendly to Kunanbai from the first, intent on avenging himself for his defeat at the last elections. Through Baimurin he energetically supported those who had sided with Bozhei.

The Aga-Sultans had changed, but the major was the same. And he too was unfriendly to Kunanbai. Aided by Kusbek, he had prolonged the case interminably and without Kunanbai's knowledge began writing to the Corps, urging that the trial should be held in Omsk. If they were to succeed, it was almost certain that Kunanbai would be transported.

These machinations, however, did not escape the attention of Kunanbai, who at once secured the assistance of the most influential of his sympathizers, first and foremost, Alshinbai.

No sooner did Alshinbai intercede than Kusbek began to withdraw, making the course of investigations easier. Several of the complaints, nonetheless, had reached Omsk. The official who was accordingly sent down to Karkaralinsk proved to be greedy, and now it was not the major alone who had to be reckoned with. The task of winning their favour and putting an end to the investigations was entrusted to Alshinbai. This required fabulous bribes and expensive presents, and both Kunanbai and Alshinbai were soon in need of money.

In mid-winter Karkaralinsk was visited by the rich Semipalatinsk merchant Tinibai, who came to buy hides. An entire chain of carts brought his great bundles of cloth and other valuables.

He had always relied considerably on both Kunanbai and Alshinbai in doing trade here. Business credit—lending cloth on the security of cattle—could only thrive if he could secure the aid of the heads of the tribes and the local rulers. In this manner he was able to obtain a steer for a sheep, an ox for a steer and a sheep for a lamb. The elders and administrators would know how to extract the arrears. The year before, Tinibai had earnestly urged Kunanbai to unite their families through marriage. At the time Kunanbai had considered such a union humiliating. How could he marry his daughter to a city merchant? He was afraid of unkind talk and gossip. They would say that he had given away his daughter to a man of low birth, that he had sold her for riches. Prudently, however, he had given no definite answer and had left Tinibai to his hopes.

Now, at a time when Kunanbai was sorely in need of money, Tinibai again urged a marriage between their families. Alshinbai took part in the negotiations, with the result that Kunanbai pledged his youngest daughter Makish, who had been born of Ulzhan and brought up in the aul of Kunkeh, to Tinibai's son. The merchant then loosened the strings of his purse and the major soon grew more tractable. Still Kunanbai was troubled: would Chernov, the official from Omsk, lend himself to bribery as well? Alshinbai and his interpreter Kaska wined and dined him for two evenings, and at last Alshinbai came to Kunanbai with happy tidings, his face shining with glee.

"I too was afraid that this official would turn out to be a death trap for you. But may Allah keep him well! He is as greedy a man as one could wish. One can hardly feed him fast enough. He just sits there, his eyes closed, chewing and swallowing. There's nothing he'll refuse. If

there's no fresh meat, slip in the skin, the hide—any trash, and he'll lick his lips over it!"

Kunanbai's affairs began to improve. The only thing that remained to do was to stop the correspondence with the Corps and destroy all existing papers. Then suddenly fresh orders were received from Omsk—on the strength of information previously received, the Corps advised the major to send Kunanbai and his case papers to Omsk. To the Karkaralinsk officials gorged with bribes, this was extremely embarrassing, but it was out of the question to disobey the orders of the Corps.

Kunanbai hurriedly sent a messenger to his aul. The news aroused despair, everyone being certain that Kunanbai would be tried and exiled. The Zhigitek and Bokenshi even insisted that Kunanbai had already been tried and that he was to be exiled to the Far North, where dogs were used instead of horses or to the mountain of Kaf.*

In his salem Kunanbai begged his family not to worry and to allay the fears of his aged mother. "I shall have to go to Omsk, but all will end well," he assured them. Zereh, nonetheless, was overcome with silent sorrow, and prayed and sighed more than ever. Unnoticed to herself, she sometimes interrupted her prayers to exclaim, "He was my only one, my one and only one and so unfortunate...." These words betrayed the burden of her grief.

Having discussed the new orders of the Corps, Alshinbai, the major, Chernov and Tinibai decided that it would be unwise to disobey. The major, therefore, sent a brief message to the Corps by "feather post":** "We are coming." He and Kunanbai were to follow with all the documents. The major volunteered to make the journey in person and to ensure that the case was dismissed.

* Kaf—a symbol for the "world's end," also the Kazakh distortion of the word "Caucasus."—*Ed.*

** The express post. A tuft of owl's feathers, the mark of urgency, was attached to the courier's hat or the bow harness of his carriage.—*Ed.*

Kunanbai had a comfortable sledge and excellent horses brought, and ample provisions and a spare harness were stowed away for the journey. With his pockets and boots stuffed with money, he set off in the company of two djiguits and his faithful Mirzakhan.

From the first day of his journey Kunanbai was assailed with doubts. He did not trust the "boiled head," though the latter had accepted large bribes and sounded reassuring. Before leaving the town, therefore, he had earnestly requested Alshinbai and Tinibai to watch the major very closely, to settle all that was still unsettled and to send a messenger after the sledge with a report.

On the third day Kunanbai was overtaken by a messenger from Alshinbai, a djiguit who arrived with spare horses. The day was sunny, but frosty, and the luxuriant manes, forelocks and tails of the two bays glistened with rime. Both animals stood steaming in the frost, flecked with foam, the messenger obviously having driven them as hard as he could.

Having helped Kunanbai to descend, the djiguit led him aside, conveyed his message in an undertone, then wished the travellers a good journey and sped back, while the troika plunged ahead.

Kunanbai shared the news only with Mirzakhan.

"Alshinbai says that we are to wait for the major to join us in Pavlodar."

"Then he means to keep his word?" asked Mirzakhan.

"Why shouldn't he? Why should he betray us? Besides, we may put pressure on him," he added. "When the time comes, I'll say the word."

Mirzakhan was not satisfied; if the "boiled head" had really meant to keep his word, then why had he sent Kunanbai to Omsk?

The other quietly explained:

"It couldn't be helped. He had to show that at the first call of the Corps he was ready to send me up and go to

Omsk himself. The important thing is to be acquitted. The trip doesn't matter one bit. Omsk is near."

In Pavlodar, where Kunanbai waited for four days, the "boiled head" finally overtook him, and on the very first evening invited the Irgizbai leader to call upon him. Kunanbai arrived, accompanied only by Mirzakhan.

The major was staying with his friend Sergei, a Russian merchant, friendly to the Kazakhs. He received Kunanbai and Mirzakhan alone in a large, expensively furnished room. The major had learned to speak the Kazakh language freely enough, though he still employed an interpreter in Karkaralinsk.

"Well, Kunanbai," he began, "you are probably impatient to see the papers that were drawn up against you, eh?"

"Let me see them! Show me all of them!"

"Very well, I'll hold back nothing! I promised Alshinbai that I would show them to you—and so I shall!" said the major.

He fastened the door with the catch and from a traveling bag produced a stack of papers sewn together in a fat folio. Kunanbai watched him closely.

"Why is it so cold here, major? I'm simply frozen. Please tell them to make the fire." He rubbed his hands and shivered.

The major regarded him intently, then called the servant and ordered the fire to be lit. While the servant brought an armful of wood, the major placed two bottles of cognac on the table, arranged various titbits, filled Kunanbai's glass and reached for his own.

Kunanbai did not forget Mirzakhan's glass. He continually urged the major to drink again and kept the conversation going. Eventually the fire was burning fiercely on a glowing bed of embers. The major had been drinking steadily and the effects were visible.

Kunanbai prodded the bundle on the table.

"Major, we have worked together for a long time. We have sat at the table together and shared everything. Now open that bundle and show me these and all the other papers! Let it be done as a sign of our friendship!"

"But there aren't any other papers, Kunanbai," objected the major. "As God is my witness, that's all there's to it, not a scrap more!"

Kunanbai rose, bent over the major to look more closely—but suddenly pounced upon him from the back, pinned his arms and called to Mirzakhan:

"Quick, Mirzakhan! Throw 'em into the fire!"

The major struggled wildly, but Kunanbai had been known for his strength since his youth and was still very strong. The major squirmed, but could not move.

Mirzakhan hurled the folio into the blazing fire. Realizing his helplessness, the major began to plead.

"Enough of that, Kunanbai, please stop it! Those are official papers! Do you know what you're doing? What shall I do after this?"

Within a few minutes the papers were reduced to ashes. Mirzakhan and Kunanbai closed the stove and smiled at each other. The major had slumped in his chair, his eyes closed. He seemed to have dozed off. . . .

That very evening Kunanbai left Pavlodar, and continued his journey.

But the moment his guests had left him, the major sprang from his place quite sober. Shaking his head, he quickly took several drinks of cognac one after another and called for his host.

Sergei was a reliable friend, and soon the matter was settled. Slipping quietly into the yard, they set fire to the small shed which housed the major's sledge, first heaping the sledge with several old rugs and a pile of papers. Within a minute or two the shed was blazing merrily.

This was by no means the first time that the smoke of a small fire had screened the major's subtle stratagems. As for Sergei, he had merely been returning a favour. When

he had appropriated official property and gone bankrupt the previous year, the major had arranged a "fire" in precisely the same manner, had then drawn up the necessary documents, affixed the requisite seal and preserved Sergei from the consequences. This new "fire" was merely a debt paid in kind for services rendered the year before.

In the morning Sergei easily came to terms with the greedy town administrators, who summoned the witnesses and took an affidavit stating that all the documents pertaining to the case of Kunanbai had been burned when Sergei's house had caught fire.

On the sixth day Kunanbai and the major, with the affidavit in his pocket, arrived separately in Omsk.

The office of the Corps investigated Kunanbai's case for two weeks, questioned him briefly and then acquitted him.

Satisfied, the major returned to his region.

No sooner had Kunanbai, now fully vindicated, arrived at Karkaralinsk than one rider after another dashed off to the Tobikty. Each wanted to be the first to bring the happy news and win the *suyunshi*.^{*} But Kunanbai was in no hurry to return and stayed on in Karkaralinsk for a considerable time.

Mirzakhan described the journey in minute detail to Alshinbai's men and other reliable friends. According to his highly coloured version, the major had been very hostile, had menaced Kunanbai with the papers and quoted the law. "With this I shall destroy you! With this I shall wipe you from the face of the earth! How will you get yourself out of this?" the major was supposed to have demanded haughtily, as he maliciously unfolded paper after paper before Kunanbai. Though he described the major as vicious and tyrannical, Mirzakhan at the same time represented him as a slow-witted nincompoop. None of his listeners, however, dreamed of doubting the truth of his

^{*} *Suyunshi*—a gift to the bearer of good news.—*Ed.*

account—they willingly took every word at its face value. Mirzakhan in every way stressed Kunanbai's bravery, agility, and ingenuity. Ultimately the tales of Mirzakhan were brought to the auls of Kunanbai by riders who added to and elaborated them even more.

Kunanbai stayed in the town until spring. Once again a friend of the major and all the Karkaralinsk officials, he tried to wangle some official post, although the aga-sultanship was not to be dreamed of.

When the first grass sprouted after the thaw, Kunanbai at last departed from Karkaralinsk as volost chief in place of Maibasars.

He had barely left the town before the news reached his auls.

4

A strange mood had taken possession of Abai that spring. He had grown indifferent to the doings of the aul, to the joys and sorrows of his kinsmen and friends. His thoughts and feelings were lost in a world all his own. Both dombra and paper served faithfully to record his passionate songs and verses—the heart-felt confessions of a youth deeply stirred. Yet how much had he left unsaid, how many songs unsung! The mysteries within him had not all found expression. And what he had said and sung seemed so wretched and bare by comparison. If he could have found a true friend, he would indeed have poured out to him all his longings, all that he had been unable to express.

"What shall I do?" he thought sadly. "Words are so poor and language so futile." He was tortured by his helplessness.

All the poems he had written so far lived within himself alone. Not one of them had reached her to whom they were dedicated. Hope? What hope could there be? Only sad and lonely dreams were left to him.

At times, far away, it seemed that he could hear the familiar silvery tinkle—now more distinct, now dying away.... These feeble echoes of his hope were agonizing. Its golden rays shone far away, beyond the range of his vision where there was dawn and morning, the brightest of morning. The image never for a moment left his mind.

When the first breath of warmth and sunshine caressed the earth, Abai felt that he could no longer stay at home. He would saddle his horse and ride off at random. And the pretext for this aimless riding was furnished by his fawn-coloured, black-faced hound.

Out of sight of the aul Abai would give rein to his horse. Let the dog find the hares by himself. Soon, in fact, he would forget all about the dog, not missing him for long periods, and then suddenly remembering and calling him. At times the hound would come upon a hare in thickets and chase it across the plain, but Abai would watch him with an absent-minded air, as indifferent as before. At last the hound would catch a hare and with his paw upon the game proudly wait for his master. On former occasions when this had occurred his masters had always sprung from the saddle and seized the game. But now Abai would merely ride on. Watching him blankly for an instant, the dog would begin to run about and bark. But for some extraordinary reason his master failed to notice even this. The dog would dash frantically between Abai and the hare, obviously annoyed at receiving no attention for his labours. When his patience ran out, he would settle the matter in his own way: leaving his master to shift for himself, he would devour as much of the rabbit as he could, and with his nose and jowls stained with blood would then overtake Abai. It was only after this that the queer hunter would notice his oversight.

Even this, however, failed to break his train of thought. and he would begin to sing a long and moving song, an offering to the heart of Togzhan.

When the cool breezes bowed the grass before him, Abai would bare his head and take deep breaths of fragrant air. He liked to think that it came from the Chinghis, from Camel Humps and the Karaul, a warm zephyr that seemed to bring the gentle breath of his beloved. He could have sworn that this was so. Reality and dreams, life and hope overran their eternal boundaries and merged into one indivisible and wonderful whole, filling him with inexpressible emotion.

One day, however, there was a sudden intrusion upon his solitude. A rider seemed to appear from nowhere in the midst of those vast and lonely steppes. Abai was startled and his enchanting dream gone.

The two riders came face to face, the wide plains stretching into the distance on all sides of them. Glancing at the stranger with irritation, Abai was about to turn away, when the other smiled gaily and called him by name like an old acquaintance. Then Abai recognized him and flushed with joy.

It was Yerbol, the djiguit whom he had met when returning from Suyundik's aul the year before. For an instant Abai feared that his too excited welcome had betrayed his secret, but Yerbol seemed to have noticed nothing.

"Hunting?" he asked. "Where is your dog?"

"Somewhere in the bushes," said Abai looking about.

The hound emerged from the undergrowth, and Yerbol shouted with laughter.

"You're a fine hunter! Can't you see that the hound's stuffed himself! Now what could he have eaten? Why, you didn't even know that there was game. And now the hound's eaten it!"

Abai did his best to change the subject. They rode on together, and not wanting to part from his friend he invited Yerbol to come to his aul.

For five days Abai kept Yerbol at the aul; the two exchanged stories, and in the evenings sang and joked

together, Abai singing Yerbol some of his own songs. In those few days Yerbol grew to be his closest friend, and finally Abai confided in him fully and revealed the secret of his heart.

"Sing these songs to Togzhan," he begged.

Yerbol had learned all the songs by heart and having promised to sing them to Togzhan set off for his aul.

Abai was obsessed with one idea: how could he see Togzhan alone and exchange but a few words with her. Yerbol kept his promise, and after three days, which had seemed like eternity to Abai, he returned and took his friend away from Zhidebai, over the Chinghis, direct to Camel Humps!

Yerbol had first confided in Karashash, the wife of Asilbek and sister-in-law of Togzhan. He had recited to her all the songs which Abai had sent his beloved as a salem. At first Karashash, a close friend of Togzhan, had obstinately refused to arrange a tryst, but moved by the songs of Abai and Yerbol's persistent eloquence she had at last agreed. Together they had recited all the songs to Togzhan.

Feverish with impatience, Abai scarcely noticed how they got to Camel Humps. At dusk the two reached Yerbol's aul, perched amid the mountains.

This small and poor winter home consisted of the one hut of Yerbol. Suyundik's aul lay across the river, less than a mile from the bank, and could be plainly seen. It was enveloped in an air of prosperity. Dense black smoke rose lazily from the chimneys, and the fat dogs waddling among the huts barked with an unperturbed dignity of their own.

But the approaches to the aul on the other side were forbidden to Abai. He was the son of Kunanbai, the enemy. If anybody over there were to learn why he had come, it would go ill with him. Both Adilbek and Asilbek were proud and vengeful djiguits, and had they known of his intention they would have been infuriated. The two

friends, therefore, decided not to cross the river until nightfall.

At the appointed time, when it was quite dark, Abai and Yerbol left their horses and crossed the ice to the other bank. The aul of Suyundik was peacefully asleep. Not a dog stirred.

Yerbol stealthily opened the gates of the cattle compound, led Abai into the camel stables and disappeared. Left in the dark, Abai scarcely dared to breathe; he could hear the beating of his heart.

But Yerbol soon returned, took his friend by the hand and whispered:

"Allah himself is with us. . . . Asilbek is not home. Come along!"

When Abai unbent from his polite salem as he crossed the threshold of the richly furnished room, he found Karashash standing by the bedside and Togzhan sitting on a cover spread on the floor. Rugs extended from the door to the place of honour. The walls were hung with felt rugs of vivid designs and silken draperies. A curtain of white silk half concealed the tall bed with its bone ornaments.

Greetings were exchanged and Karashash advanced to remove Abai's hat and help him to loosen his sash.

Togzhan was overcome with confusion. She scarcely replied to Abai's greeting and flushed and paled by turn. Her blood raced too hotly to conceal the secrets of her heart, her embarrassment, her fears and her hopes.

Yerbol did not want to disconcert his friends with his presence.

"I'll see to the horses across the river," he said.

Abai nodded.

Karashash went off to prepare tea, but did not return.

Left completely alone with his beloved, Abai was at first quite at a loss, and could see that Togzhan too was

as bashful as a child. He leant towards her and for some time gazed steadily at her.

"Togzhan. . . Did you hear my salem?" he asked at last. "Those words came to me out of longing for you, of my thoughts of you. . . . Did you listen to them?"

Togzhan's entire demeanour seemed to answer: "Why then am I here? Was it not your voice which brought me?" Modestly she smiled and said:

"I heard them, Abai! Your songs are very fine!"

"I am no akyn. But from the time I saw you I have been out of my senses. I have not been able to forget you even for a moment."

"Why did you not come to see me then?"

"How could I? You know what has been happening. It was only in our thoughts that we could meet!"

"True," said Togzhan and flushed. "But I saw you once. . . . During the wandering. . . . Whether you noticed me or not, I do not know."

Abai was thrilled by her words.

"Oh, Togzhan, how wonderful that you should say this! I nearly shouted at the time, 'Stay! Stop but a moment!' I could hardly help myself! I was certain you did not notice me. But if you did, then I must have been worthy of your attention. Do you imagine that it is at all possible to forget you, Togzhan?" Abai took her slender white hand.

Trembling, Togzhan withdrew her hand.

The hours of that long evening wound firm bonds about the two young hearts. They demanded nothing—only to see and talk to one another. It was their first meeting. There was no end to the flow of their talk, as though they were seeking to quench a long and burning thirst.

Karashash returned only at dawn, she prepared tea and departed again. Abai then took Togzhan into his arms and kissed her. Togzhan gently pressed her delicate hands to his face and carefully pushed him away. But this was hardly resistance, but rather modesty, charming and

embarrassed. Abai drew her passionately to him again and pressed his lips to her eyes. For an instant Togzhan's warm face caressed his, but then she slipped away once more.

"Light of my eyes," exclaimed Abai, when Karashash suddenly rushed in.

"May God have mercy on us, Abai my dear! The ice on the river has broken up! The ice is moving! Where is your horse?"

Abai heard her tumbled words but could not take them in—he was so consumed with emotion. But Togzhan was worried and frightened.

"What are you saying? How will he get across the river? You must go!" she pleaded, fearful for his safety.

Abai at last understood. His horse was on the other bank and that meant there was no escape. It was impossible to stay in the aul, for he would soon be discovered. Even if they did not seize him at once, they would find him in the morning and there were none who wished him well on this side of the river. Above all, it was necessary to leave the house to avoid bringing trouble on Togzhan and her sister-in-law, who had received him so kindly.

Slipping into his coat, he pressed Togzhan's hand reassuringly:

"Never fear, Togzhan. I'll cross somehow. And Yerbol will bring messages from me."

Togzhan touched Abai's breast with her white fingers and pressed towards him.

"Good-bye! Don't forget!"

Kind, gentle-mannered Karashash then led Abai through a dark passage into the open.

"Well, my dear," she said. "You've not been with us long, but you can see that you've friends among us who feel for you with every breath. Do not forget us! Be careful when crossing the river! Khosh! Farewell!"

Abai took her hands in his.

"I shall never forget you, zheneshetai!* To the end of my days, I shall not forget what you have done for me," he said, and turned to go.

The roaring of the ice reached his ears, but he scarcely noticed it. His thoughts were still with those wonderful people he had just left. The joy within him caught at his breath, their beauty still shone as he remembered Kara-shash's sensitive sympathy and Togzhan's tender charm.

At the water's edge he found that the mountain torrent had burst its banks. Boulders thundered and the shattered ice crackled and roared as the stream swept everything swiftly past.

Abai stood very still, not knowing what to do next. It would be madness to attempt to cross. But morning was near and something had to be done. He wandered along the bank until he saw a small grove. He walked faster, then rushed back, but there was no escape. He was merely losing time and it was getting lighter—he could make out everything around him. The moment the aul was awake, people would come here to watch the moving ice. The first to appear would be the anxious old men. And here was he, the son of Kunanbai, near the aul of Suyundik, alone and without his horse. Their suspicions alone might prove dangerous to him.

And yet Abai was not afraid. The happiness within him did not fade and there was no room for fear. Faced with the gravest danger he did not lose his head or run about aimlessly. He was cool and self-controlled, no longer a youth, but a man, mature and sure of himself!

Hiding somehow in the sparse bushes, he kept a sharp watch on Yerbol's winter hut. Soon he perceived a man rapidly approaching the river somewhat above his hiding place.

"Yerbol! Yerbol!" he shouted.

It was indeed Yerbol, who quickly turned at Abai's

* Zheneshetai—an affectionate term for a sister-in-law.—Ed.

voice and sharply motioned him to crouch down out of sight. But Abai continued to stand, waiting.

The Karaul is a narrow stream, but its current is swift. Yerbol ran to a spot right opposite Abai's hiding place. He was very pale and almost beside himself with anxiety, as though he himself were in danger. Trembling for Abai, he thought that his friend was standing still from sheer helplessness and horror.

But Abai soon appeared at the water's edge, his white teeth flashing as he laughed.

"Find a way out, Yerbol! The Karaul's decided to betray me," he cried.

Yerbol leaped from the high bank to the edge of the water and shouted back:

"Keep low in the bushes. Stay where you are! I'll be back! Don't be afraid."

He disappeared, but soon returned riding a huge reddish bull. Abai was amazed. Why had his comrade not saddled a horse? Yerbol descended to the water and prodded the bull into the current. The animal was afraid to enter the icy stream and kept stubbornly turning round and round. But Yerbol finally managed to do what he wanted. Once in the water the bull no longer held back and moved steadily across. The stream at this point was not deep, but the current was strong and the ice bulky. The bull made slow but steady progress, and Yerbol at last hurled the end of the long reins ashore. Abai caught them in mid-air and pulled hard. Lashed by the man on his back the bull finally scrambled up the bank.

Yerbol had proved himself a true friend. He had come to help at the risk of his life. Abai hurled himself on his neck.

"Where is my horse? Where did you find that bull? Why didn't you come on your own horse?"

"If I'd run back to the aul for the horse, they'd have caught you long ago," laughed the other. "We'll do without the horses."

The two climbed on to the back of the bull and turned his head towards the stream; but try as they would, they could not urge him into the water. After he had heaped curses upon the animal and all its ancestors to the seventy-seventh generation, Yerbol got off, disgusted, and began to scan the scenery behind the sparse shrubbery. The eastern skies were reddening and all was as plainly visible as in broad daylight. Fortunately, the aul was still peacefully asleep.

Suddenly Yerbol rushed off.

Abai had not long to wait. Yerbol soon appeared on a strong grey mare.

"Where did you get it?" asked Abai.

"It was grazing over there. It belongs to the shepherd of Suyundik's aul."

"He's certain to need it."

"What do you care?"

"How will he herd the sheep? He can't do it on foot."

"To the devil with him! Let him go on foot, him and the protecting spirit of his flock! How can I leave you here? Get on! Quickly!" And he helped his friend to mount the unsaddled mare.

Abai was moved.

"Yerbol, my friend! You're very good to me! You're my best friend! I'll never forget it!"

Yerbol had mounted the bull.

"Stop chattering! Move on!" he said, handing him the reins.

Her hoofs seeking the treacherous bottom of the stream, the snorting mare kept her balance in the icy current and plunged ahead. The bull waded on behind, and the friends were soon safely across.

On the other bank the djiguits left both mare and bull and ran through the undergrowth bent nearly double to keep out of sight. They risked the open only when they were far downstream.

Abai did not enter Yerbol's hut, but asked that his horse be saddled as quickly as possible. Touched by the loyalty of his companion, he parted from him as from a life-long friend, and rode homewards down the river.

5

By the time Kunanbai had returned from Karkaralinsk, some of the auls had already moved from their winter houses to the yurtas, and the green of the steppes about the winter place was dotted with their white and grey crowns. Though the families in which there were old men and women still dwelt in the houses, the young folk had all moved to the spacious yurtas, so fresh in the spring. In their bright plumage of the new season the auls indeed seemed young, boisterous and intensely alive. Spotted lambs and kids gambolled about in the sunshine, filling the air with their bleating. The young shaggy camels strode about, rolling their large hazel eyes. The droves of horse were alive with innumerable woolly, long-eared foals. The calves too had grown and, lashing their tails right and left, they scampered and raced over the green. The whole of nature joined in an irrepressible riot of living and sang in exultant chorus: "We are the joy of this earth, sprung from non-existence to create beauty and good." It was spring indeed—shining, flowering and seething with life.

Both of Kunanbai's auls had settled at Zhidebai. The mares which had grazed with their foals throughout the year were being milked, and every morning and evening the kumys was noisily stirred about in shining black skins.

Kunanbai was received with special honours not only in his own aul, but in all the auls of the Irgizbai, Topai and Zhuantayak. His kinsmen and friends who had been riding with the happy news from aul to aul poured into Zhidebai, presented their salem to Kunanbai, and were

feasted in his tents. In their turn they conducted him to their own auls, where feasting continued from morning till night.

The more prosperous of his kinsmen invited not merely Kunanbai, but his entire family as well—his mother, wives, children and nearest relatives.

Zereh slaughtered the best ram which she had long promised as an offering for the safe return of her son. In Kunkeh's aul Kunanbai, too, slaughtered a horse that he had promised as an offering on the happy conclusion of his case. These celebrations were also a necessary piece of business to Kunanbai—such a gathering of his kinsmen enabled him to find out where they stood, to see who was on his side and who was not, to note how each received him after the difficult time he had been through.

All the aksakals and karasakals* were present in the crowded gatherings.

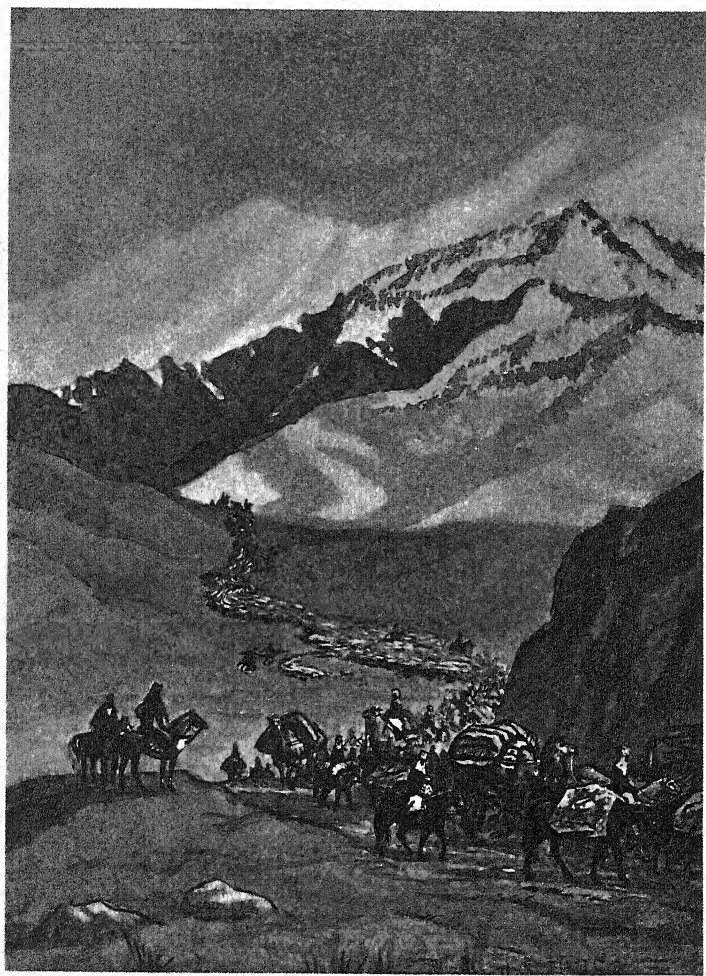
Karatai, the chief of the Kokshe, who had maintained so cautious and ambiguous a position in the autumn, now welcomed Kunanbai with noisy joy and never left his side.

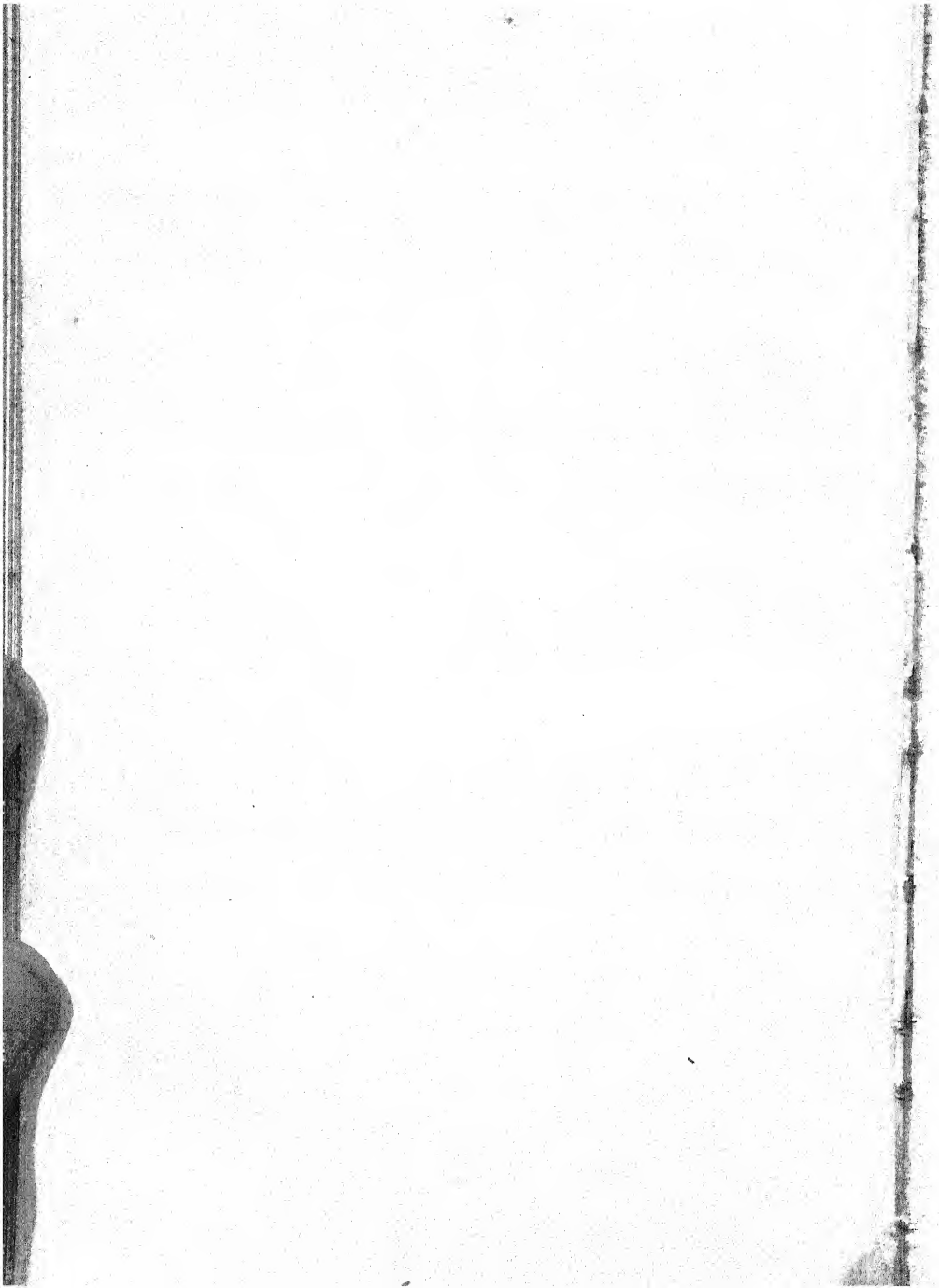
Only a few days previously the auls had been full of rumours. Kunanbai, it was said, had been broken, exiled, stripped of office and power. But now he had returned fully vindicated and vested with the authority of volost chief, and the ill-wishers were silenced.

Mirzakhan's stories of Kunanbai's courage and daring had penetrated everywhere and were retold even by the children. Kunanbai's daily and generous feasts signified more than a mere celebration; he was gathering his men, rallying his kinsmen, uniting them firmly as before, and rising to his previous stature in their eyes.

The auls had already left the winter places and were streaming down the hills towards the various spring pastures. Kunanbai's guests grew fewer and he was able to spend more leisure time with his wives and children. During his father's three-day visit to Ulzhan's aul in the

* Karasakal (black beard)—a middle-aged man.—*Ed.*





valley Abai could not help noticing that he had grown greyer and that more wrinkles had appeared on his face.

When Kunkeh, Kudaiberdy and Aigiz had gathered to dine with Ulzhan one day, Kunanbai, though addressing Zereh, made a few remarks intended for the entire family. His words were full of a bitterness born of his recent harrowing experiences. Never before had he felt so alone, he said. Neither among the elder nor the younger kinsmen had he found a single man upon whom he could rely. He expressed his regrets that he had so long delayed the marriages of his grown sons and had missed the joy of bringing up his grandchildren and watching their innocent frolics.

All the mothers including Zereh could only approve and welcome his words. This meant the marriage of the grown sons, the birth of grandchildren—the long-awaited joy of all of them.

Kunanbai also said that Allah had been his mainstay in his hours of trial, but that his supporters among men had been the two prospective fathers-in-law of his children. In them, he said, he had found true friendship and sympathy. They were Alshinbai and Tinibai. On his way to Omsk, moreover, he had been received with friendly concern by Baitas, the elder of the Tasbolat clan.

Then Kunanbai spoke of a decision he had reached during the trip. Baitas had a little daughter named Yerkezhan, and Kunanbai had decided to seek her in marriage for Ospan. The thing was settled—she was the bride of this mischievous son of his. This was joyfully received by all, and especially by the mothers, who laughingly argued about how best to break the news to the imp who was to be fettered at last.

Kunanbai now came to the two remaining sons of Ulzhan. Takezhan had called upon his betrothed the year before, and his father-in-law had already received the whole of the bridal money. Why delay any longer? Let Takezhan set up his Young Yurta. The second decision

was the most important and deserved the concern and assistance of all present. Abai had to be made ready for a visit to his betrothed. Kunanbai had already discussed this with Alshinbai and they had decided to arrange the wedding in the spring.

Among the prospective connections Kunanbai attributed the greatest importance to Alshinbai. Apart from their close ties of friendship, Alshinbai was a son of Kazibek and a descendant of Tlenshi, known over the entire Argin, and by far the most influential man in the region. To send a suitor to his daughter for the first time was no simple matter and required serious preparations. The outlay of cattle and other property would be considerable.

The mothers approved, though Zereh said thoughtfully: "Would it not be better if we sent him when we'd arrived at our summer quarters and the troubles of wandering were over and done with?"

"Alshinbai's zhailyau is too far from our summer grounds and will be difficult to reach," Kunanbai explained. "The cattle will tire and grow lean on the way. Abai, moreover, will be accompanied by kinsmen of advanced age and the journey will be difficult for them. In short, he'll have to set off within the next five or six days."

He turned to Ulzhan. "You too will go. Take your son to his new family."

Kunanbai hated delay and then and there named those who were to accompany Abai and specified the number of cattle and the quantities of cloth, money, jewels, bullion, silver plate and other gifts to be sent. The gifts for Alshinbai also included two droves of picked bays.

The trip gave rise to endless discussion.

Izguty and Kudaiberdy were sent to make the necessary purchases in Semipalatinsk that very night. They were instructed to consult with Tinibai in the town, to buy all they could find and to return quickly—not later than within four days.

Each of Kunanbai's sons reacted to the decision in his own way. When Aigiz and Izguty turned smilingly to Ospan, saying, "You have been betrothed and shall have a bride," the boy could not understand at first.

"A bride? What for?"

Izguty then explained and demanded his opinion.

"I'll take her. Why not! A wife may be useful!" came the prompt reply, evoking general laughter.

But Abai's expression perturbed Ulzhan when she told him of his father's decision. "He's bashful, perhaps," she consoled herself.

Abai received the news in cool silence. His whole being was tense, as though an icy finger had touched his heart. Togzhan flashed to his mind; he felt as though he were committing some crime against her.

For days he brooded withdrawing into himself. Forebodings oppressed him. He now had a bride. And Togzhan too had a betrothed to whom she had long been promised. He could not refuse to go, refuse to marry—the will of one's parents was law. And what pretext could he have found to refuse the journey? With all his heart he craved for Togzhan, but to extricate himself from the net in which he was so hopelessly enmeshed was impossible.

He set off to call upon his betrothed in gloomy silence.



The Ascent



1



THE BRIDEGROOM'S train at length reached the aul of his future father-in-law.

Alshinbai had but recently arrived in this broad valley of abundant springs and pastures. His aul stood surrounded by some forty others, the tents of the Boshan clan, who were linked together through their common ancestor Kazibek. Everyone was eagerly awaiting the guests, yurtas had been prepared for them and food and drink were ready. On the day of the bridegroom's arrival the mares had been tethered for milking earlier than usual.

In accordance with time-honoured custom, Ulzhan and the elders, attended by thirty djiguits and a bevy of women, had arrived a half day earlier. The chief negotiator for the bridegroom was to be Kunanbai's brother Izguty, who was following with aksakals, singers, djiguits, and herdsmen to see to the horses. Abai had a suite of twelve djiguits of the younger generation of Irgizbai, as well as jolly Mirzakhan, the messenger Zhumagul and Takezhan, his nearest kinsman. Abai had also invited Yerbol and throughout the long journey of more than a week was inseparable from him.

Ulzhan had brought valuable gifts: droves of horses and camels, a variety of fabric for the women, and other valuables. Two camels were laden with gifts for the bride:

bales of bright silks, velvet and other materials, and many shawls. Two other camels carried huge bundles of capes, shirts, kerchiefs, kaftans, all kinds of materials, footwear and other gifts as prescribed by custom.

The most valuable of the gifts were ingots of silver for Alshinbai himself.

Ten years before, when Kunanbai had come to obtain the promise of Dilda's hand, the bride's parents had presented him with a heavy tai-tuyak.* And now, Ulzhan had brought nothing less than a besik-zhamba** of even more astonishing proportions. Kunanbai's gift had thus outshone Alshinbai's, and no sooner had the bridegroom arrived, than all the auls could speak of nothing but the generosity and precious gifts of his father. It was soon learned, however, that Alshinbai was going to pay in kind.

Three enormous snow-white yurtas stood magnificently furnished for the bridegroom and his kinsmen. One-year-old foals just weaned from the mares, three-year-old rams and the largest of the lambs had been picked for slaughter. A fattened foal was especially set aside for the yurta occupied by Ulzhan.

Abai's train came to a halt as they drew near the aul, while a part of the djiguits, including Takezhan, Mirza-khan and others, rode on to announce his arrival. Abai and Yerbol dismounted to meet the girls and young women who were to come out of the aul to receive them. That would mark the beginning of endless and complex ceremonies, and Abai detained Zhumagul, who in his time had endured all the torments of the ritual and might be useful.

"A wedding is supposed to be a joyous occasion for the bridegroom and his parents," Abai remarked to Yerbol.

* Tai-tuyak (foal's hoof)—a silver ingot of specified size.—*Ed.*

** Besik-zhamba—cradle-ingot.—*Ed.*

"Why then do they torture people with those endless ceremonies?"

Zhumagul laughed:

"You are going to be tortured—and very soon! There are no feathers in your hat to begin with. And you'd better put on that red cape before you get your cheeks slapped!" The bridegroom's traditional fur hat, pulled well over his eyes, had to be tufted with the feathers of an eagle-owl. In addition, he had to wear a cape of red cloth and high-heeled boots to distinguish him from the rest of his company. The attire had been prepared for Abai before the journey on Zereh's orders, and though the old woman had always let her pet grandchild have his own way, she had tolerated no objections on this occasion.

"It is the custom of your forefathers," she had repeated firmly. "It's not you whom they will blame, but us! 'Were their fathers never bridegrooms or their mothers brides?' they will ask. Put it on at once!" She had helped him to dress with her own hands.

In this curious array, Abai felt much like a witch doctor or an itinerant magician. As soon as they had left the aul, he edged his horse towards Ulzhan and pleaded:

"For the love of Allah, why should I proclaim that I am a bridegroom throughout the journey? Please let me wear my usual clothes. I'll put on this bridegroom's dress when we arrive."

Very reluctantly Ulzhan had consented. And thus Abai had not yet once donned his "sorcerer's" apparel. The tufted fur hat and the red cape were still stowed away in a saddle-bag. It was of these that Zhumagul reminded him.

"As you know, Barak-Batir once said, 'My heart has never quailed before an armed enemy, but quail it did when I had to call upon the parents of my betrothed.' Realizing that Abai was growing really nervous, he hastened to add, "Yes, there are horrors in store for you, but

be firm of spirit, all will end well, I know it from experience."

The friends laughed and Yerbol once again exhorted Zhumagul:

"Please prompt him—when and how to bow, when to sit down or get up and when to push his hat from over his eyes at last and be comfortable."

Yerbol's painstaking attention touched Abai—his friend was worrying over details that would never have occurred to himself. Could there be a truer, more devoted friend?

Until then Abai had believed that the finest moments of their friendship had been those when Yerbol had crossed the flood waters of the wild mountain stream on the back of a bull. But now he seemed quite another man. Where was the Yerbol he had known before? That old friend and this one were two different people. Which was nearer to him—more dear?

On the day the journey began Yerbol had brought Abai news which had distressed him deeply. When Togzhan had learned that Yerbol was to accompany Abai to his betrothed, she had begged him to convey to her beloved the following message: "A brief glimpse in the light of the moon—and he was gone. I am left in darkness. But may his way be a happy one, may he be cheerful and fortunate—such is my salem to him!" And as Yerbol had spurred his horse to go, she had covered her eyes with her kerchief and wept.

The vision had tormented Abai all the way. How acutely he had felt the crushing burden of compulsion, the yoke of an alien will which had forced him to make this journey. Morosely he now awaited his first meeting with Dilda.

The ringing laughter of girls and women suddenly reached his ears, followed by the tinkle of the sholpy. It was a bevy of women in snow-white headdresses, and the girls in caps of homespun silk, coming to receive the

bridegroom. A crowd of children was milling about them.

As they came nearer to Abai and his djiguits some of them exclaimed:

"Now which is Abai?"

"Which is the bridegroom?"

"Why, they are all alike! He's not dressed as a bridegroom should be!"

Abai was embarrassed, but forced a smile.

"Pick whom you like best and let him be Abai," he said.

The girls laughed and quickly identified the groom. One of them, however, rebuked him:

"No, my dear! You may wear the Tobikty hat in your own aul! In ours you'll have to wear the wedding dress!"

She began to question the djiguits and to search for Abai's hidden wedding clothes. Zhumagul finally yielded and took off the saddle-bag.

"Didn't I tell him, 'Put them on!' But no—he won't listen! Teach him a lesson now! I have his clothes right here!" He handed the bag to the girls.

While Abai was dressing, the children scrambled on to the horses' backs in twos and threes and galloped away towards the aul. A bunch of boys stood around Abai's white-maned golden ambler and looked at it admiringly.

"It's an ambler!"

"Oi-bai, how good!"

Three youngsters scrambled on to the saddle and drove the horse off. The welcoming party and the bridegroom's men had to walk to the aul on foot.

Against the other tents the yurta set aside for the bridegroom was a dazzling white. Inside, it had been decided not to decorate the tent excessively and to preserve an impression of spaciousness. The framework, however, had been concealed beneath rich silken draperies and ornate carpets, and the vivid colours of many fabrics lent the dwelling a festive elegance. Wool and elaborately

patterned felt rugs extended from the entrance to the places of honour, heaped with silken covers and cushions. A couch of carved bone to the right was covered with fifteen spreads of silk and pillows of immaculate white. The head of the bed was curtained off by a piece of satin with designs of red and blue.

Seated in front of the bed, Abai was hemmed in by his future sisters-in-law. Yerbol, Zhumagul and the other djiguits took places amid the girls a short distance away.

No sooner had all been seated than three young women ran into the tent calling:

"The curtain! Lower the curtain!"

The girls at Abai's side sprang up and lowered the satin curtain, to conceal him from the entrance. Only then did they fold back the door flaps.

"Come in, come in," they said to someone beyond the door, glancing meanwhile in the direction of the bridegroom. "Welcome the mothers-in-law!"

Abai and all the others sprang to their feet.

The curtain was not raised, however, when three elderly women entered. The first was the eldest mother-in-law—the stout, dusky baibishe of Alshinbai. At her side stood the real mother-in-law, the mother of the bride.

"Well, mothers, the ransom! Where is the ransom? Or else we shall not show you your son," the young women said jestingly, the hem of the curtain in their hands.

"Raise the curtain! Here's your ransom," replied the baibishe, indicating the sweetmeats she had brought.

The satin curtain was raised high to reveal the bridegroom, standing dumbly obedient, his head modestly bowed.

"May you live a long and happy life! May Allah grant you a happy future, light of my eyes," said the baibishe as she threw the sweets to the girls.

There was a shower of dried apricots, raisins and sweets, caught in mid-air or retrieved from the carpet by the laughing young women.

"May God give you joy from the first," chimed the mother of the bride. "May you have lasting joy and happiness, my dear Abai!"

No answer was expected from the bridegroom. He had merely to stand still, submissively silent. Alshinbai's wives kissed him upon the cheek one by one and, without more ado, departed from the yurta.

Abai was uncomfortable throughout the evening, unable to accustom himself to his new position. The huge bridegroom's hat hung over his eyes, made him sweat and irritated him. But the worst to endure was the staring. From all sides they were staring unashamedly at him. "Is he handsome? Is he a fit spouse for our daughter? How is he behaving?" said every curious pair of eyes. Having arrayed the young man in clothing which turned him into a stuffed dummy, they seemed to be mocking him now: "Just look at him! See what he is like!"

Tea was soon served, but conversation flagged. Zhumagul and Yerbol, whose jests had always evoked laughter, now felt ill at ease and sat stiffly, exchanging polite remarks with the girls near them. Abai was particularly struck by the appearance of three of the girls, who were elaborately dressed and had unnaturally white faces and flaming cheeks. He did not know that it was customary for the grown-up girls of the Boshan people to paint their faces.

The elder djiguits—Mirzakhan, Takezhan and their friends—gathered in the yurta after tea. With them they brought the singers and jesters of the Boshan clan. The company brightened up, there was a cheerful hubbub of talk and jokes. A merry noisy cluster of girls and women surrounded the bridegroom. All were there but one—Dilda, the bride, had not yet appeared.

The first visit of the groom was known as "the ceremonial visit," or sometimes "the visit with gifts" or "the crossing of the threshold," or "the visit of the pressure

of the hand." This being a first visit, it was hardly likely that he would see much of his bride.

The parents had first to hold a toi* to celebrate the first visit and the finalizing of the marriage contract. A toi was no light matter, and had to be arranged thoroughly and without haste. After this would come "the pressure of the hand" between bride and groom. So Abai did not see his bride on the first day. Nor did he see her on the second day, and he continued to stay in her aul without the faintest idea of what she looked like. Only Yerbol was able to pay his respects to Dilda on the day after their arrival. Pleased with her appearance he was glad for Abai's sake and returned to share his impressions with him. But Abai cut him short and changed the subject.

The toi which the young people had been awaiting so impatiently was held on the third day after the bridegroom's arrival. From morning till night Abai's yurta was thronged with innumerable women—the mothers-in-law, girls, young wives and his exacting and noisy sisters-in-law. Zhumagul and Yerbol received them with a most courteous and dignified air, and it was as much as they could do to greet each of the countless women who came. Abai was sorely harassed by both of them.

"Now get up! And now sit down!" they urged incessantly. "More have arrived! Oi-bai, many more!" And they would make him go through the ceremony all over again.

The singing did not cease in the bridegroom's yurta. The merry-making was in full swing, and sweetmeats were steadily consumed. A constant flow of servants kept the guests supplied with kumys and tea, and the tablecloths were never removed.

"The toi has begun, the toi!" came the cries beyond the door after dinner.

"To your horses! Mount the horses!" shouted others.

*Toi—feast.—Ed.

Abai and all the men of his company rushed out of the yurta. The horses of the bridegroom's suite stood tethered and saddled. Like other men, the groom was permitted to mount and watch the feast on horseback. The girls and young women stayed in the aul, while Abai and his suite of fifteen rode off and took up a vantage point somewhat apart from the others.

The numerous auls in that flourishing valley were observing the occasion with extraordinary generosity, regaling all whom they could gather. Alshinbai was determined to dazzle everybody with the splendour and magnificence of his toi, and so many guests had been invited that their horses roamed about in huge droves.

Yes, it was a great toi—there were as many as five or six dozen yurtas set up for the guests, extending in a double row for no less than a mile. The kitchen yurtas had been placed at the other end of the aul.

Abai and his suite had come out in time to see a long line of servants charging from the kitchen to the guest yurtas, every man of them on horseback. Some twenty masters of the feast, easily distinguished by the white cloths wrapped around their heads, stood waiting outside the kitchen tents.

The djiguits detailed to serve the guests were mounted on the fastest pacers—this to stress the magnificence of the toi. The slender, well-groomed horses were dashing to and fro, covered with lather. Twenty djiguits holding the reins in their teeth then flew towards the guest yurtas with a deep dish in each hand. Others followed at their heels. These riding waiters galloped jauntily to their respective yurtas at top speed and came rigidly to a stop without spilling so much as a drop of the gravy. The ak-sakals and karasakals deftly took the hot dishes from them and handed them to others within the tents.

As usual the guests ate heartily and the waiters were kept galloping between kitchen and guest yurtas. The feasting had begun when Abai was still in his yurta. By

now he had ridden far into the steppes with his djiguits, but the eating and drinking went on. The guests mounted their horses only after they had drained an enormous number of skins of kumys and consumed innumerable dishes of meat.

Then followed the games: races, wrestling, a game in which the riders struggled to capture the carcass of a goat, combat on horseback and horsemanship contests. The old men who came out to watch could not cease marvelling.

"This is a great toi," they said.

"The bridal gifts were very fine, but Alshinbai too has grudged nothing!"

It was on that evening that Abai first saw his bride.

The groom's yurta was bursting with guests. All the relatives of bride and groom had come, headed by Alshinbai himself, Ulzhan and Izguty. Abai and his suite sat separated from them by a screen, and it was only the elders who spoke and laughed freely. The young people behind the screen spoke in whispers—only the girls dared laugh quietly, since they were more at ease in their own aul. Finally, there was a movement behind the door, and the young women at the entrance drew back the door flaps to admit several girls.

One of them was Dilda. Her face was hidden in a red hood so that Abai and his friends could see only her figure as she removed her outdoor shoes. The bride seemed to be slim, but tall and well-proportioned.

She was led to her place at Abai's side, and there she sat, without discarding the hood. Abai would have liked to say a few words in greeting, but Dilda had not turned to him and he held his tongue.

Immediately the bride arrived, the meat dishes were served. Both the guests of honour and the young people behind the screen applied themselves to the food, but the bride and the groom scarcely touched it. When the meal was over, a mullah, whom Abai could not see from behind

the screen, read the marriage prayer. A chalice of cold water was then brought and passed round, first of all to the guests of honour, until it finally reached Abai, who took a sip and proffered it to Dilda.

Two of the bridesmaids then smilingly seated themselves before the bride and groom, wrapped Dilda's right hand in a light silk fabric and placed Abai's right hand upon it. He could feel her slender fingers. One of the bridesmaids who sat facing him humorously observed:

"Oh, he's sharper than he looks! Has your hand stuck to hers? Now, give your hand to me! Stroke her hair," she commanded.

The girls beside her laughed loudly. The bridesmaid took Abai's hand and guided it so that he stroked the bride's braid with the palm. The silk used for the pressure of the hand was here used again. Abai had to stroke the braid twice.

The wedding thus concluded with this ritual, long known as "the pressure of the hand" and "the stroking of the hair." After this final ceremony it was customary to reward the bridesmaids. The quick-witted girls succeeded in getting their share from Dilda as well.

The elders then raised their hands in a final prayer:

"May happiness accompany them! May they live long! May Allah grant them abundance!" they chanted in unison.

These wishes of their kinsmen reached Abai and Dilda behind the screen. The elders then rose and left the yurt. The young people did not stay long either. They all went their ways to leave the groom with his bride.

Abai had not yet spoken a word to Dilda. They had not even seen each other properly. From the corner of her eyes she had only managed to steal a glance at his features when, herself concealed by the screen and the hood, she was taking her place at his side.

There seemed to be more room in the yurt now. One

of the maids who had been rewarded for her part in "the stroking of the hair" now turned to Abai:

"We shall prepare the bed! You'd better go into the open for a while. Refresh yourself a little!"

Abai was chilled by her frankness. Quickly he arose and left the yurta. There was not a soul to be seen about, and even Yerbol had vanished. He was alone. The night seemed blacker, for the clouds had gathered in the evening. Abai walked far from the tent.

The girls too left Dilda. Only two bridesmaids remained, the two from whom she had been inseparable the entire evening. One of them now led her out of the tent while the other lowered the curtain and prepared the festive spreads of the couch for the night.

The bridesmaid embraced Dilda and laughingly asked: "How did you like him?"

Her reply was calm:

"How can I tell—he's fat and dark, isn't he?"

There was a note of disappointment in her words.

"Nonsense! You did not have a good look at him! He's dark and handsome," the maid reassured her.

The bridegroom's heart too was heavy.

All that abundance and glitter and his suite of friends and kinsmen truly belonged to the celebration of a happy occasion. Merriment, good food, crowds of guests, splendour and magnificence had followed his every step. The prayers and good wishes were meant to stress the happiness awaiting the two young people. But were they really? Had not the elders arranged it all merely to observe the courtesies and demonstrate their mutual regard—for the sake of upholding the age-old traditions.

Abai and Dilda had not even seen each other, but the elders were not concerned about that. The first real meeting of bride and groom was to take place on the nuptial bed now being prepared.

Abai had read many books. "My beloved and chosen one"—how he had worshipped those words! They had

blossomed in his heart pure and bright. Togzhan's shining beauty now tormented him. He could not forget her for a moment. But Togzhan was far away—why did she not appear before him now, a winged vision?

A sudden silvery tinkle—Abai wheeled. It was one of the bridesmaids.

"Do you really think you're priceless?" she said jestingly. "Why do you make her wait so long?" With this, she led him to the yurt.

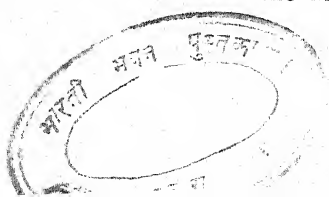
The curtain was down and the bed stood ready. Dilda and the maid were nowhere to be seen. Abai removed his coat, which was promptly put away by the young girl, who then removed his boots and reminded him that he was to give her a last gift for the last ritual—"the removal of the boots." The gift usual on such an occasion was considerable. But Abai's pockets contained sufficient money provided by his thoughtful mother. He flung the money to the girl almost with revulsion.

The moment he had undressed, he threw himself upon the bed and rolled under the silken cover. Dilda had not yet come, although he could hear the tinkle of her sholpy from time to time. Was that too a part of the custom? If she would only enter while the lamp still burned! But having seen Abai safely to bed, the bridesmaid took the lamp and opened the door to admit Dilda as she slipped out.

His bride was approaching in the dark. He had been indignant all day but now he suddenly grew numb and indifferent. As he lay quite still, he could clearly hear her every movement, every rustle of her approach. She was removing her beshmet; then she threw off her little boots and in an instant stood over the bed. Not at all bashful, she began to feel for her place. Abai had not noticed that he lay near the very edge. Suddenly he heard her say somewhat roughly:

"Move over!"

Such was the first meeting of the young pair whose



union had been celebrated for days with magnificent festivities with all the attendant feasting and other lavish spending. So indifferent, commonplace, ordinary. Abai edged away towards the wall.

He could not overcome his coldness and reserve. In Dilda too there was no warmth. She had suffered herself to be led to the groom as prescribed by tradition, but her heart was alien to him. Her pride haughtily reassured her: if her spouse was the son of Kunanbai, she was the granddaughter of the esteemed and respected Alshinbai. Shame and bashfulness was the lot of the common people. Calmly she did all she had been advised to do by the bridesmaids.

Abai stayed in Alshinbai's aul for two weeks more. Ulzhan left five days before her son, but the djiguits stayed behind with the bridegroom.

By the time of Abai's departure the young pair had grown somewhat used to one another. At times they had even jested and laughed. To Abai Dilda seemed attractive and even pretty. She, too, had grown used to his ways. But they were not drawn to one another and their hearts were cold.

The elders were wont to regard the first visit of a bridegroom as his initiation into a new life. Abai had left it behind him, but not a spark had been kindled within him. On the contrary, when he returned home something seemed to have snapped inside him, and he appeared to have aged suddenly by several years.

2

At home the auls had moved to their summer grounds beyond the Chinghis. Kunkeh's aul, where Kunanbai now dwelt, was as always filled with guests. With his djiguits Abai approached Kunanbai, who stood in the crowd, and presented his salem.

Before the return of his son, Kunanbai had questioned Ulzhan in detail about the wedding. He therefore gave Abai a friendly reception as he cheerfully invited him and his companions to join the repast. Abai, however, noticed that it was only Kudaiberdy who was truly happy to see him.

Kudaiberdy asked many questions about the customs of the Boshan people and then begged Abai and Yerbol to sing the new songs they had heard—this as a special favour.

"It appears that the Boshan people sing better than we," said Abai reaching for the dombra.

Kudaiberdy objected, saying with a smile:

"That depends on who was singing—the Boshan people or the heart of the young bridegroom who had arrived to meet his bride. Perhaps the songs seemed especially attractive to you there?"

This evoked general laughter, but Abai would not yield.

"It's true, Bakeh!" This was his name for Kudaiberdy.

"Instead of praising the Boshan people, you'd better sing some of their songs yourself."

"That's right. The songs will speak for themselves. Let us begin, Yerbol!"

Abai sang a verse which was caught up by Yerbol and their voices merged. The song, called "The Steed," was unknown among the Tobikty, and Abai noticed with satisfaction that his hearers were duly impressed.

"How do you like it?" he asked.

The applause was general, and Kudaiberdy was as pleased as the rest.

"It's a good song," he agreed.

"Well then, here's another!" and Abai and Yerbol sang the "Beautiful Girl."

This, too, took Kudaiberdy's fancy. Then Abai and Yerbol conferred in whispers.

"Now we'll sing the song we've been saving for last," they said, and together poured forth the moving verses of their third song, "The White Birch."

After three verses all were spell-bound, and Abai let the strings of his instrument tremble and die on a deep, soft note.

"Well, Bakeh, what do you say now?" he asked.

"I think you are right," Kudaiberdy admitted, "you've brought us very fine songs."

Abai then told them that the songs "Green Valley" and "The Olive-Skinned Girl," which they had taken to Alshinbai's aul, had met with no success at all. Firstly, they were old and known to every child, and, secondly, the Boshan had been accustomed to singing them to altogether different tunes. It seemed to Abai that the Tobikty were no masters of song, but more often than not borrowed the tunes of other tribes and spoiled them with their singing. Kudaiberdy's objections were thus overruled and the elder brother regarded the younger with pride; he noted that since his journey Abai had developed greater insight and had learned to weigh up things for himself.

When he returned to his mothers on the following day, Abai was received with great joy by the entire aul. Old Zereh did not take her loving eyes from him, while his younger brothers hung round his neck, thrust their heads under his arm-pits and could not do enough to show their delight.

Ulzhan's aul had already taken up quarters on an extensive area in which there were abundant fields, meadows and springs. All the local Tobikty auls were anticipating great events. Abai had heard something about them, but now learned the details. The children, the young people, the elderly folk and even the old aksakals were preoccupied with one thing, and one thing only: the grand funeral feast to be held in memory of Bozhei within the next few days.

Bozhei's kinsmen had been preparing for the feast since the winter. Invitations had been extended to everyone in the spring, and the day and place had already been designated for the ceremonies. The Zhigitek, Kotibak, Bokenshi and Torgai peoples, united for a year now, had set up their yurtas on the broad and verdant summer grounds of Kazbala. An important feature of the ceremonies was to be the grand baiga,* and nothing could have been more convenient for the races than the vast spaces about Kazbala.

Abai and Yerbol were glad to be back—they had been homesick. Yerbol was eager to return to his own aul which, he learned, was also to take part in the memorial feast.

On the day after his return Abai had a long talk with his mother, questioning her about all that had taken place in his absence.

Kunanbai, she said, had been holding big councils since the beginning of spring and seemed to be making intensive preparations for something unknown to them. As a result of endless feasts, Kunanbai had managed to draw several of the clans to his side. Some had been won over with gifts, others with promises, and still others had been affected by ominously cold salems. In barely a month he had gained many new supporters, among them such important and influential figures as Karatai. Kunanbai had at last succeeded in drawing to his side those whose equal kinship with his enemies had served them as a pretext to keep aloof of hostilities one way or another. The Irgizbai chief was now opposed only by three or four clans: the Kotibak, Zhigitek and others.

These, however, had been preoccupied with preparations for their funeral feast since the winter. Kunanbai was aware of this, and before wandering from the winter grounds he had demanded the return of the fifteen winter places they had recently received from him. Their

* Baiga—races; also the prize.—Ed.

belongings had to be removed by autumn and no people could be left behind, since these lands would again pass into Kunanbai's possession.

Each of the auls had been informed separately. No reasons had been given—merely orders. In this manner Kunanbai had recovered fourteen of the winter places. It was only at the fifteenth that he met with resistance.

This was the winter home of Baisal.

When Kunanbai's message had been conveyed to him by Karatai and Zhumabai, Baisal quietly explained:

"Carry my salom to the volost chief. Tell him we've known each other from childhood and that none knows better than he that I have no land. Kuneken is not short of land. He has already retrieved fourteen of the fifteen winter places. Let him leave me my share. I've invested money there and arranged things to my liking."

Kunanbai had been enraged by such a reply and on the same night sent Karatai and Zhumabai once more to Baisal; they were to tell him to stop wrangling and leave the winter grounds at once.

Now Baisal was enraged by Kunanbai's unbending despotism, and he replied that he was ready for any encounter.

"I've reasoned with him, but he refuses to understand," he said. "The biggest affront is not that he is seizing the land, but that in his eyes I am nothing. When I sat peacefully still he kept picking at me until I was forced to rise. It was over land that he bored into Bozhei like a worm and finally drove him to the grave. Am I better than Bozhei? I have nothing to lose. I won't give up what is mine! I won't budge from these winter grounds!"

Fearing a fresh conflagration, Karatai decided to take the sting out of Baisal's reply when reporting to Kunanbai, but the Irgizbai chief was not easily deluded. "That is not the way that Baisal speaks," he said firmly, and demanded an accurate account. Karatai was thus compelled to repeat exactly what Baisal had said.

From that day Kunanbai's anger against Baisai and Baidaly flared up anew. The forthcoming memorial feast alone prevented him from taking decisive steps. Ulzhan knew that as soon as the clans had set off for their summer grounds, there had been endless quarrels and skirmishes between the auls of Kunanbai and Baisai. Kunanbai had set up his auls in the immediate vicinity of a Kotibak aul and was constantly harrying his enemies and driving their cattle from the pastures. Baisai was retaliating, and the djiguits of the Kotibak stood guard over his aul by day and night.

The Kotibak were now located very near Kunkeh's aul, and the slightest pretext might serve as a spark to kindle general hostilities. Kunanbai was constantly resorting to violence and deliberately provoking a clash. Guessing his plans, Zereh had left before the others and had placed her aul next to that of Baisai. She was determined to restrain the herdsmen and the more fiery of the djiguits and to prevent such injustices as might be wrought by Kunkeh's aul.

Ulzhan was deeply pained by these incursions and by Kunanbai's indifference to the memory of Bozhei. Not once had he visited the Zhigitek leader's grave. Surely he would not cling to his bitterness even now, a year after Bozhei's death? Ulzhan spoke of these things, sighing deeply.

Abai frowned, and began turning things over in his mind. He was silent all that day, and at night could not sleep, tossing restlessly. This was the first time his mother had laid before him all the details of his father's quarrels and litigations, and shared with him her long pent-up bitterness. Perhaps she thought that it was time for him to take part in the affairs of his elders. She had spoken frankly and with some heat.

Yerbol returned in time for dinner the next day, and the friends at once went to the Great Yurta for kumys. Suddenly Kunanbai's loud voice broke into their conver-

sation. He had arrived alone and, obviously annoyed, was upbraiding someone as he dismounted.

"Hey, Zhumagul and Mirzakhan! Come here!" he called as he entered the yurta.

The two djiguits obediently approached, while Kunanbai strode to the place of honour.

"It is not by accident that Baisal has set up his aul next to mine," he said without sitting down. "He is driving his herds in our direction. Very well, we shall see who'll get the upper hand! Take your shokpars and soeels and chase his droves away, to the farthest of the pastures!"

The djiguits left at once and within a few minutes one could hear the clatter of weapons and the sound of horses being led out. Abai went into the open.

"Wait!" he shouted, approaching them.

The djiguits had already mounted and were fastening their hats.

"What are you going to do?" Abai demanded.

"We'll do what has to be done when there's a raid. What's unusual about that?" replied Zhumagul with irritation.

"You'll do nothing of the kind! Listen!" began Abai.

"Are you suggesting that we disobey the Mirza?" Zhumagul cut in.

Abai grew angry and came closer.

"Stay where you are. Not another word!" he cried, his eyes bloodshot, his pale features darkened. His fists were clenched, and the djiguits paused in spite of themselves.

"You're not to touch the horses, not to beat them or drive them anywhere! Just tell the herdsmen to move them away and then come back!"

"What about our orders?"

"I've given you your orders! Just try to do otherwise and you'll pay dearly!" threatened Abai.

So unusual were his voice and appearance that both Mirzakhan and Zhumagul were filled with misgivings as they rode away. Abai returned to the yurt.

"Father," he said firmly, "there's more than enough of fodder on our vast summer grounds. Why be so miserly and anger our kinsmen?"

Kunanbai turned to him coldly.

"You seem to think that Baisal is in need of an advocate?" he observed acidly. "Or should he, perhaps, not return my winter place?"

"That was a winter place, but these are summer grounds," Abai persisted.

"Do we not settle the scores of winter in the summer—on zhailyau? Do you think it was fair of him to make capital out of my misfortunes and seize my land?"

Abai was silent for an instant, but then went on as quietly as he could:

"To tell the truth, it was not Baisal who began this violence, but we. Did he not plead for a piece of winter land for years? Was it not for winter land that he followed you to take part in the thrashing of Bozhei? It is unjust to take his only scrap of land from him. It is from such things that..."

"Enough of your chatter!" Kunanbai snapped harshly, trying his best to keep his anger in check. "It is not for you to argue with me!"

Abai paused again, but then went on:

"It is unworthy to quarrel over a pasture with such summer grounds as ours."

When the affairs of his tribe were discussed, Abai had always been afraid to speak his mind openly and had made cautious and timid remarks, as though his tongue would not obey him. The new ring in his voice now compelled Kunanbai's attention.

Zereh and Ulzhan were listening. Did they too, perhaps, think like his son, but were afraid to say so? Kunanbai sat brooding. For some moments he was still, then

reclined, turning on his side with his head on his palm. Abai at once offered him a pillow. Kunanbai tucked it under his elbow, turned his back upon his son and lay there meditating.

Meeting with no rebuff, Abai decided to go on to yet another matter.

"The children, all the members of the family must share their anxieties with you. Is it just that they should fear to speak, that they should have to conceal everything? You should hear them and know their views."

When addressing a pious father it was best to speak the language of the Holy Book and recall the first and second commandments. Abai had not miscalculated. Kunanbai was obviously prepared to listen, and the young man spoke more freely:

"Permit me to mention another matter: the funeral feast in memory of Bozhei. Upon us, his kinsmen, rest many duties which we have as yet not fulfilled. It is too late to speak of the past, but they are now preparing for the final funeral feast, and this will not only be a test of the Zhigitek but of humanity itself, of kinship and of conscience. When Bozhei died, we kept aloof. But now we must do our part at his memorial feast!"

The humiliations of the past year rose in Kunanbai's memory.

"What am I to do? Force myself upon them uninvited? Shall I go there to be kicked in the chest as last year?" he asked bitterly.

"You need not go yourself—you can send us. We'll take part in the ceremonies and that'll be enough. If you permit, I shall take care of this myself. Let me have only Izguty and allow us the necessary cattle and everything else," urged Abai.

Kunanbai raised his head, put on his hat and got up. All eyes were turned upon him, expectant and pleading.

"Do as you like!" he growled reluctantly. "You may lick the feet of Baidaly and Baisal for all I care!" With this he left the tent.

And yet he had consented; whether he had felt compelled to do it, or whether he had said what he had in a fit of anger, Abai did not stop to think. It was sufficient that his father would put no obstacles in his path. He at once conferred with his mothers, explaining his plans, having thought things out carefully and well.

Zereh and Ulzhan agreed that his best helpmate would be Izguty, who was summoned that very day. Of his brothers Abai invited only Kudaiberdy, and discussed all the details with him. Kudaiberdy promised his aid wherever it was needed.

Before departing, Yerbol drew Abai aside and said:

"I just wanted to say, Abai, that your talk with your father made me rejoice for you, it made me proud of my friendship with you. I shall go home now, but will return to help you."

The next day Abai was on horseback, heading for the Kazbal ridge in company with Zhumabai and Mirzakhán. The numerous auls of the Zhigitek and Kotibak had been left behind and he reached Bozhei's tents.

The auls were preparing for the memorial feast, and a string of yurtas had sprung up on the hillside below Bozhei's aul. The great event was only a few days off and all were in a hurry. Every single man was on horseback. Long trains of camels laden with the tents were converging upon the hillside from all sides.

Abai and his companions first stopped at the yurta of mourning for prayers. The Great Yurta had not changed. There was the same black-and-white pennant to the right, and inside were the same elaborate decorations. Solemn and sad, the yurta stood waiting for the first anniversary of the death of its master whose clothing hung emptily upon a richly designed felt rug within it.

Those who had come to arrange the details of the event had gathered outside the aul. Refreshed with kumys in Bozhei's yurta, Abai and his companions mounted the low hill where the council was being held. From there riders were constantly being dispatched with the most varied assignments. Prominent figures amid the gathering were the elders—Baidaly, Baisai and Suyundik.

Baidaly had aged visibly in the past year, and the grey of his beard and hair had turned to silver. When Abai approached to present his salem, the aksakals received him in a friendly manner without a shade of their former austerity. Baidaly and Suyundik asked about the health of Zereh and Ulzhan and invited the young man to seat himself at their side. Among the djiguits attentively awaiting orders from the elders stood Zhirenshe, with whom Abai had long been acquainted. This, however, was the first time he had seen him since Baisai's quarrel with Kunanbai, and Zhirenshe received him as warmly as the others.

With Abai's arrival the elders broke off their conversation. There was silence for a while, and then Abai turned to Baidaly:

"Baidash-aga," he began.

In few well-chosen words he unhurriedly explained his mission.

His mothers, headed by Zereh, had wished him to convey their salem to those gathered here and to assure them that they, too, wished to partake in the commemoration of Bozhei as best they could. On the previous occasion they had been too late, but this time they had decided not to delay matters and had sent Abai with sincere hearts.

Baidaly listened attentively.

"Your kinsmen are satisfied with you, my son," he said. "May Allah grant you success! Please tell us how you intend to begin?"

Abai now repeated all that he had discussed the day before with his mothers and Izgutty and Kudaiberdy.

He wanted a site in the valley for yurtas to receive guests. He promised that ten large tents would be set up no later than the same evening, sufficiently spacious to accommodate three hundred people. He would supply the food and furnish the plate and other necessities. Let the aksakals trust him and give further instructions. He knew that each of the surrounding auls was to entertain the guests of one clan or another, and so he, too, would like the elders to say whom he should receive; he wished, moreover, that they should entrust him with the care of some honoured guests.

Baidaly, Baisal and Suyundik then discussed further details with Abai.

The feast was to be attended by envoys from the largest clans living in the most distant places—from Karkaraly, Semirechye; the lower reaches of the Irtish and the shores of Lake Balkhash. Among these there would be especially important guests, Bozhei's maternal kinsmen of the Naiman tribe. Long since there had been a famous Naiman leader by the name of Bozhei. Kengirbai had become his friend and had given his son Yeraly in marriage to the Naiman leader's daughter, whose son Bozhei had been named after his famous grandfather. In the winter Baidaly had already informed the Naiman people of the forthcoming commemoration, and recently it had become known that these kinsmen of Bozhei were coming.

"If he wishes to have guests, then why not entrust to him the care of Bozhei's kinsmen," suggested some.

Abai gladly caught it up. He had apparently won the confidence of the council since the entertainment of such guests would require great tact and care.

"An excellent idea, Baidash-aga," he said. "We shall look after Bozheken's kinsmen of the Naiman. Entrust them to us."

The council offered no objections. The Naiman people had heard only of quarrels and clashes between Kunanbai and Bozhei; let them see, therefore, how everyone

honoured the memory of the departed Zhigitek leader. Though unspoken, this thought was as clear to everyone in the council as to Abai himself.

The young man then asked for two djiguits well acquainted with the preparations in the other auls. Baidaly named Yerbol and Zhirenshe.

Not another moment was to be lost and Abai jumped to his feet. Suyundik regarded him with satisfaction.

"Is there anything more contagious than a bad example?" he asked. "Those who seek evil do not do so out of excessive wisdom, and evil shall neither benefit them nor bring abundance. All the more, therefore, should we honour him who seeks what is good. I can see, my son, that your intentions are sincere and your path a true one. May God give you success," he concluded.

Abai was pleased with the council. He had not been repulsed but received as one of themselves. In good spirits he mounted, and accompanied by Zhirenshe and Yerbol surveyed the plain where the yurtas were being set up. After conferring with his djiguits, he indicated the spots for his own tents and cauldrons. Yerbol and Mirza-khan marked the sites and stayed to meet those whom Abai would send later that day with the requisite cattle, yurtas and utensils.

Abai took his decisions quickly, gave instructions quietly and surely. When he had gone Zhirenshe remarked, "Abai has become a man! God grant that he keeps his word."

"He'll keep his word. He'll do all that he has promised! You'll see!" Yerbol assured him.

Before he had left Ulzhan's aul, Abai had ordered that the preparations should be begun in his absence, and the work was well underway there. All instructions came from Ulzhan, Izguty and Kudaiberdy. Before his departure Abai had made the rounds of all the Irgizbai auls on his golden bay to choose the yurtas he would

need for the guests. Two which had worn felt had been rejected and replaced.

No sooner had he returned than all the ten yurtas were dismantled and packed. By evening a long caravan was on its way to Kazbala with swaying stacks of folded yurtas and huge bundles of ornate rugs, draperies, spreads and pillows. Ulzhan herself had picked the snow-white towels and elaborately embroidered table-cloths, and had arranged for the plate and kitchen utensils to be packed separately. The caravan was accompanied by the djiguits who had been chosen to set up and decorate the yurtas and to wait upon the guests.

The first steps had been taken. When the caravan had set off, everyone gathered about the Great Yurta to discuss further measures: the number of cattle for slaughter and how to transport the kumys. Ulzhan saw to the arrangement of the kitchen and the preparation of the food, giving warning that this would require great skill. At last she declared that she, Aigiz and Sary-apa would go to Kazbala on the morrow.

"You have made your decisions," Zereh declared. "Now do things in such a way that my children shall not be disgraced before their guests from afar. If each of you wishes to act with honour, then forget the old quarrels! If we were not able to preserve Bozhei's friendship when he was alive, let us not bring down upon ourselves the curse of his ashes! My sons and daughters, be courteous and attentive to your guests! A real man shows his worth not only in war and strife, but in his dealings with other men as well. Even if you die of weariness, let it not be seen! Wait on your guests cheerfully and happily but do not be noisy and never lose your sense of moderation! Be serene, sparing of words and modest! If you fail, then I here declare—I had better sink into the grave!"

The Great Aul kept hard at work all night and by morning yet another caravan had set off for the site of the memorial feast with the kitchen yurtas. At daybreak, too,

Ulzhan, Aigiz and Sary-apa were on their way. Abai and Izguty were the last to leave.

The yurtas sent with the previous caravan had already been set up in the Kazbala plain and furnished and decorated within. The djiguits took up their posts near the doors, and at every entrance stood a huge vessel filled with kumys.

Ulzhan then threw herself into her work. She was determined to have Abai's yurtas outshine all the others and to see that the repasts for the honoured guests were choice and lavish. The fattened cattle were butchered on the river-bank, and there they were singed and carved for the cauldrons.

Even now Abai's yurtas were the finest of all. Splendid within and without, they were fit to receive the most distinguished of guests. Suyundik and Baidaly inspected the tents and dismounted near the kitchens to exchange greetings with Ulzhan. They were impressed and pleased with her diligent preparations.

"The food for the guests and their proper care are plainly necessary matters," she said drawing Baidaly aside. "But tomorrow there will be the horse races and wrestling matches and prizes for the winners, and you have already put up the Nine* with a camel as the chief prize. My son would like to give his share and has asked me to bring this." Ulzhan produced a parcel bound with a silken cord. "Let it be the chief gift of one of the Nines."

It was a large ingot of silver—the tai-tuyak.

The repasts were ready by sunset when the first of the guests swept into the Kazbala Valley.

Upon a hill outside the aul Baidaly, Suyundik and Izguty had long been greeting the newly arrived visitors, who converged upon them from all sides in groups of forty and fifty. As they approached, each was intercepted

* The prize to the owner of the winning horse comprised a camel, an eagle, a horse, a cow, a foal, a sheep, a goat, a rug and a cloak or any other nine valuable items.—*Ed.*

by a mounted djiguit who asked whence they had come and then led them before the elders. Custom demanded that the newcomers should first greet the hosts of the memorial feast, express their best wishes and only then retire to the yurtas assigned to them.

Abai and his forty djiguits stood near the guest yurtas ready to receive the most distinguished of the guests from Semirechye.

By sunset several thousand had arrived. Most of the yurtas set up by the Zhigitek, Kotibak and Bokenshi were soon filled, but Abai's guests arrived only at dusk.

Bozhei's uncle on his mother's side, an impressive-looking aksakal, had arrived in the company of numerous relatives. Dismounting on the hill, he embraced his hosts one by one and then stood aside, surrounded by the closest of Bozhei's maternal kinsmen, some sixty in all. Behind them gathered a great throng in the lambskin hats of the Naiman tribe.

Izgutty and Suyundik led the guests of honour to their respective yurtas, and the rest of the company followed close behind. They were heartily welcomed and helped from their horses by Abai and his djiguits. Suyundik then presented Abai to the aksakal as the son of Kunanbai, and the young man gave a low bow of welcome.

Even before they had dismounted, Bozhei's kinsmen were struck by the splendour of the ten yurtas assigned to them. Those who had been received in other tents had not been able to refrain from asking, "Whose yurtas are those? For whom are they intended?"

Bozhei's aged uncle and several other aksakals were led by Abai to the central and most magnificent of the yurtas. The other guests were also warmly received by the djiguits, who cheerfully showed the way to the other yurtas. Bozhei's kinsmen of the Naiman people had brought with them a black and two greys for the morrow's races, with carefully braided manes and tails and forelocks tufted with feathers. Three agile boys were rid-

ing them, and Abai entrusted both riders and horses to the care of his djiguits.

The guests kept pouring in and it grew difficult to distinguish their dress or to tell the clans apart in the gathering gloom. Some were mounted on blacks, others on greys, and only when a ray of light fell did their saddles flash silver. By the time it was quite dark six of the ten yurtas were filled.

The hubbub at last subsided and, believing that the last of his guests would arrive in the morning, Abai ordered the repast. He was interrupted by Yerbol:

"Many more have just arrived!"

Abai and his djiguits at once went out to meet them. There was a crowd of new guests from nearby Siban. Abai ushered them to their places and with his men at once saw to the food. The kumys was followed by tea and then by hot meat dishes carried to the tents on horseback.

Weary with their long journey, Bozhei's kinsmen soon retired, and Abai was then able to give his attention to the guests from Siban. Their eldest was the akyn Kadirbai, son of the renowned and eloquent Aktilak, that same Kadirbai who in his youth had come to be known as the "boy akyn" when he defeated the famous akyn Sadak in a contest of poetry and song. Many of his songs were well known, and Abai, who knew most of them by heart, was delighted to find him among his guests.

The old man had been told that the yurtas in which he and his companions were to stay were those of Kunanbai, and he had guessed as much when he had seen the choice repast, the valuable plate and the abundance of sweetmeats. But now he learned that it had all been arranged by a youth, Kunanbai's son. When Abai appeared, the old akyn received him with sincere warmth.

Beckoning the young man to his side, he offered him a cup of kumys with his own hands. Abai was greatly impressed by this white-bearded old man, with his open

friendly face. Kadirbai inquired after the health of his parents and thanked him for his attention and hospitality.

Abai asked no questions, merely answering those of Kadirbai briefly and to the point. His guest of honour was obviously pleased and tried to draw him out.

"Barlas-akyn," he began, "once told me that Kuneken had a son just returned from school. If I remember correctly, he said that this youth, the son of Ulzhan, was brought up by Zereh and was a great lover of song. Could that youth be you?"

Abai smiled bashfully.

"Barlas-akyn once visited us," he answered, returning Kadirbai's gaze.

"Your father is not distinguished for his love of song," the old man continued, "but do not be offended; I am a man of his age and may freely speak my mind. Tell me, how did you come to be fond of song?"

Abai was about to answer—the words were on the tip of his tongue, but it was not seemly for a host to speak overmuch and then, too, the guests might find a wordy reply to the old and revered aksakal impolite. He hesitated.

That did not escape Kadirbai.

"I can see you want to say something! Speak up," he encouraged.

"Be it as you wish, Kadekeh," said Abai finally. "Forgive me if my words seem irrelevant, but is there a man alive, unless deaf of ear and mind, who does not love a song? I am sure there are songs of which my father is fond. Perhaps you know only of his opinion of this song of yours:

*Never has such a steed been known
To amass such honours, such renown!*

Abai smiled mischievously, while the others looked at each other astonished. Kadirbai reassured them with a laugh:

"Good God! You too have heard of this?" Kadirbai turned to the company. "It is true that I once praised Soltabai too highly and when Kuneken heard the song, he reproached me, saying, 'Soltabai is rich and powerful, of course, but why should you humble yourself so before him?' See how this youth has got the better of me!" Kadirbai laughed heartily.

In this yurt the conversation did not flag, and no one cared to go to sleep for a long time. When Abai and his djiguits at last arranged the beds for the guests and drew the door flaps of the yurt behind them, the East was greying and the slumbering ridges south of Kazbal were growing lighter. The stars had faded and the feeble light of the dawn had thrown into a sharp relief the lonely peak sleeplessly watching over the rugged boulders and the still indiscernible gullies and ravines below.

On their way to the kitchen yurtas Abai, Yerbol and Izguty exchanged remarks in undertones:

"It's morning! We shan't get any sleep now."

"Yes, we have other things to do!"

They decided to get down to preparing for the coming day, which would undoubtedly prove the most difficult.

Abai's guests stayed in their yurtas until the midday meal, when Abai devised a novelty which pleased everyone—guests, onlookers and those employed in the kitchen yurtas. The djiguits chosen to bring up the food were mounted on fast pacers with saddles inlaid with silver. A white silk kerchief was wound about the head of every man and when they darted from the kitchens towards the guest yurtas swinging their steaming meat dishes, the blaze of their silver seemed to shine over the steppes. The kinsmen of Bozhei could find no fault with their hosts; the feast had surpassed all expectations.

When the meal was over, Baisai, accompanied by fifteen of his djiguits, rode to the top of the hill with a banner held aloft. This was the signal for every man to saddle his horse and follow. The grand baiga was to begin:

horse races, the chief attractions of the feast, followed by the wrestling matches. The animals chosen for the races headed smoothly and gracefully for the rallying grounds, their manes and tails carefully plaited. There was an eager hubbub of argument and discussion in the crowds.

Abai had no opportunity to see how many were going to the races. He could not go out with the rest because his guests from afar were not expected to leave that day and it was necessary to prepare the evening repast. Both he and Izguty were hard at work, assisted by their djiguits, who had not been permitted to ride off to the baiga. Yerbol alone could not withstand the temptation.

"I'll tell you the news, anyway! I'll let you know what is happening!" he cried, as he galloped away. From time to time he came back to report the latest news. Although no one could yet say how many had arrived altogether, he was sure there were at least several thousand.

Abai's guests were on their horses in anticipation of the signal. At last Baisai voiced the rallying cry, raised the banner and dashed off towards Karashoky, where the broad plains were admirably suited for the races. No sooner had the signal banner darted ahead than all the riders swept forward. Abai could see that their number was enormous. From vantage points outside the yurtas Ulzhan, Aigiz and their servants watched the endless stream of horsemen with wonder.

But it was only one wing of this great body of riders that they could see—there were so many that the other was out of sight. Wave after wave of them swept by like clouds driven before the wind. Almost anyone who could ride a horse had come out for the races.

Yerbol reported that one hundred and fifty horses were to compete for the ten Nines. The chief prize of the first was to be a camel, and of the second, the silver ingot yesterday contributed by Ulzhan. The wrestlers too were to receive the ninefold baiga.

At noon Ulzhan summoned Abai and told him that they would run out of food if the guests were to stay another day. Abai could not therefore attend the races, and he sent Mirzakhan and Izguty home to ask Kudaiberdy to send up five fattened two-year-olds immediately and to remind him that the next day they might be short of kumys for their guests. Most of them were to depart in the evening, but those of Abai were to stay yet another day. For him the memorial festival was a period of care and hard work by day and night.

The guests returned at sunset tired and thirsty. As on the evening before they were met by friendly and helpful djiguits. After the guests had slaked their thirst with cool kumys, tea was served. In pairs the djiguits brought in huge steaming samovars, and the yurtas at once grew cheerful and cosy. Abai's repasts were even more choice and abundant than on the day before. Baidaly, Baisal and Suyundik joined his guests after dark, having been especially invited by Ulzhan and Abai to see for themselves how generous and varied was the food and how warm the hospitality of the Irgizbai.

Abai could not snatch a wink of sleep that night either—the third night was as full of excitement and worries as its predecessors.

On the following day Abai ordered dinner to be served earlier than usual. When the meal was over, Bozhei's uncle summoned Abai, thanked him warmly and gave him his sincerest blessings.

Ulzhan, Izguty and Yerbol were worried to see how Abai had changed in the past days. He was pale and haggard as though from a long illness, his eyes red from lack of sleep.

Izguty and Yerbol, too, were utterly exhausted, and the three of them fell to joking over their appearance.

"We look like that old hag of Karashi that was sent into the race at the peak of the noon heat," laughed Yerbol.

"I'm ready to fall down and sleep where I stand. It's all I can think of," admitted Abai.

But at that moment they were summoned by Baidaly to Bozhei's yurta. The rituals were not yet finished: the mourning horses still had to be slaughtered and the ornaments from Bozhei's yurta distributed.

The closest kinsmen of the deceased could not refuse to take part in this. All the Tobikty, headed by Bozhei's uncle, therefore made ready for the final rites. As Baidaly, surrounded by numerous kinsmen, approached Bozhei's tent, the women who had been in mourning all the year came out to meet them. Baidaly then removed the black-and-white pennant and handed it to Baisal who, in accordance with custom, hurled it to the ground and broke the staff. This signified the end of the year's mourning.

At a signal from Baidaly the crowd headed by Suyundik entered the yurta to remove the ornaments of mourning. This was a second sign that the mourning was over. Bozhei's baibishe and daughters turned their backs upon the company and began the funeral lament. Their listeners sat silently weeping. This was to be the last lament over Bozhei's departure. The last reading of the Koran was followed by the final prayers. Then all arose and left the yurta.

The two mourning horses, grown fat and wild, were brought before the tent. With tears in their eyes a number of kinsmen hurled them down, and then the horses were slaughtered by Baidaly himself.

All three—Baisal, who had broken the staff of the pennant of mourning, Suyundik, who had removed the ornaments, and Baidaly, who had slaughtered the horses—had been Bozhei's oldest and closest friends. The consummation of the final rites had therefore devolved upon them.

One was not allowed to leave without partaking of the final funeral repast, the meat of the slaughtered horses, and Abai found waiting very difficult.

When the last meal was over in the yurta of mourning, he took leave of the elders and was about to set off for his own aul when Baisal called him and briefly pressed his cheek to the young man's forehead.

"My son, I have not yet been able to speak to you and express what I feel, but I have remembered that Bozheken was once moved by your action in Karkaralinsk and gave you his blessing. Do you remember his words? He expected much of you and blessed you for that reason. I treated you with coldness then. But I have since heard more than once how you have spoken up for justice, and in these past few days, too, you have shown yourself the true brother of Bozheken. Try to justify the hopes of your eldest kinsmen! I am sure you will, light of my eyes! If only this cursed life of ours does not cause you to blunder. The future lies before you and your path is the right one. God give you success!" And Baisal blessed Abai.

Baidaly, Suyundik and Kulinshak heartily supported Baisal and added their blessings to his. Abai thanked the aksakals for their friendly wishes and took his leave.

He rode off with Yerbol—Ulzhan had set off before them in her cart. Swaying in their saddles from exhaustion, Abai and Yerbol, at times at a walking pace and at others at a gallop, at last reached Botakan. Ulzhan had already ordered the Guest Yurta and the beds to be prepared.

In his aul, Abai entered the Great Yurta, greeted his grandmother and at once turned to Ulzhan:

"Sleep, sleep! . . . Apa, I must sleep!"

Ulzhan offered the two friends cups of kumys, then showed them to the Guest Yurta and saw them to bed with motherly concern.

Both were snoring almost before their heads touched the pillows, and they did not awake until noon the following day. Refreshed with kumys, they once more lay down and slept until evening. Awakening in the twilight, the friends sat about sleepily for a while and then relapsed

into slumber again. Only by noon on the third day did they feel refreshed.

Abai did not suspect that common talk and rumour had brought him far-flung glory. He had become a famous and highly respected djiguit.

3

The entire zhailyau talked only of their impressions of Bozhei's memorial feast. Its sponsors, numerous participants and even those who had stayed at home and knew about it only by hearsay could speak of nothing else. Sweeping the auls of the Tobikty, the reports reached not only the settlements of kinsmen living in distant places, but even the remotest auls of other tribes. Sleepless and hard at work to entertain his guests, Abai had not realized the scope and luxury of the memorial feast, its ceremonies and festivities.

It went down as an event that was unequalled throughout the region. The generosity and friendliness of the hosts would indeed serve as an example to many generations.

Garrulous old men, eager and excited youths, women and children, all kept talking of the event. The tales and stories were endless, enough to last all summer, all autumn and well into winter. Who would ever forget the names of the champion wrestlers, the horses that had won the baiga, the side-splitting jokes and those who had distinguished themselves for their wit and eloquence during the festivities.

The name of Bozhei would henceforth be a favourite name of Tobikty parents for their newborn. The memorial feast would in time acquire such renown that it would serve to determine the ages of the children—and not merely of those who were born that year. "He was born five years before the Bozhei feast," they would say, or "two

years after the Bozhei feast." The dates of betrothals, the ceremonial visits of bridegrooms, weddings, circumcisions, deaths, would be counted in relation to the year of Bozhei's memorial feast. Even of the finest racing horses to win in the subsequent baigas it would be said, "He was only a two-year-old at the Bozhei feast" or "he was a four-year-old at the time." A famous memorial feast had always served as a memorable date and had even marked the beginning of an era, and had lived in the memory of men for generations. The feasts commemorating Ablai and Bopy, of the dim and distant past, are remembered to this day.

The fame of the memorial gathering spread throughout the Chinghis, over the broad zhailyau, across the valleys, ravines and gullies. The names of those who had distinguished themselves for generosity and hospitality, for rich repasts and devoted attention to the guests floated upon the tide of general acclaim and acquired a glorious lustre.

The names of the sponsors—Baidaly, Baisai and Suyundik—were particularly prominent, and yet young Abai had won even greater renown than they. Stories about him were passed around everywhere.

The tellers usually related first how Abai had held forth against Kunanbai, how the youth had bravely reproached his stern father whose frozen heart would never thaw. The friendly reception and courteous attention accorded to the guests in Abai's yurtas had shone forth even in that gathering of thousands and could, beyond doubt, have served as an example to all. Abai had won the favour of each and every one of his guests, and had received their blessings. He was a fine young man, one who had the people's welfare at heart.

Many were the old men who spoke of Zereh and Ulzhan. "Old Zereh," they said, "was a wise mother, who devoted her remaining years to the people and wished everyone peace and happiness. It was she who had raised

her grandson, who had hopefully clasped him to her bosom as a babe—and her hopes had been justified!” Nor was there any lack of praise for Ulzhan, who had attended the memorial feast to assist her son.

The wave of approbation reached the Great Aul while Abai was still asleep. Tidings came even with the men of other tribes who had visited the auls of the Zhigitek, Kotibak and Bokenshi. Karatai, who had made the rounds of the Kokshe along the Bakanas River, said that the news was known even there. It had reached the Kerei people, wandering in the lower reaches of the Bakanas and Baikoshkar, an altogether different region.

On the third day Abai and Yerbol at last got up, refreshed themselves in the river and returned to a meal.

Zereh placed Abai at her side and herself served his tea.

“My little black lamb,” she said, stroking his shoulder.

Ulzhan set the roasted head and side of a sheep* before him.

“Your mothers have roasted a sheep in honour of your coming to manhood,” she said.

“Why so, apa?” Abai was astonished.

“You two have been sleeping and know nothing! The people are praising you everywhere and are saying you’ve become a man. Our kinsmen are pleased with you,” she explained.

“Now why should they be? One would think I’d overturned a mountain! Better say that you needed a pretext to slaughter the poor lamb! Well then, let’s eat, Yerbol!” Laughing, Abai began to carve the meat.

Five days went by. Yerbol had returned to his own aul, but suddenly appeared again on a foaming horse, galloping at top speed towards Abai, who was strolling near the aul. Abai’s heart began to beat wildly. It was a long time since his friend had been able to tell him anything of

* The head of a sheep was first served to the eldest for carving.—*Ed.*

Togzhan. Dashing up, Yerbol playfully knocked the hat from Abai's head.

"Suyunshi!" he shouted.

The two understood each other without further words.

"Things could not have turned out better," said Yerbol. "Suyundik's youngest son Adilbek has just set off to visit his betrothed. All the men have gone with him. As you know, I have not been able to see Togzhan or even Karashash for a long time—for some reason Adilbek was suspicious of me. But today I discussed everything with the zhengeh. Togzhan is longing for you, and Karashash says that she often speaks of you. Everyone has been praising you since the memorial feast; there is talk about you everywhere. Both the zhengeh and Togzhan say the same: that there is not a djiguit around who could compare with Abai. Now make up your mind! Show yourself at last! That's what I came for. We'll discuss the details later—just have your horse saddled quickly and away we go!"

Abai turned pale with joy, and soon they set off for the zhailyau of the Bokenshi in the deepening dusk.

Abai rode his golden white-maned pacer and Yerbol a light grey. Both wore grey capes and hats, and their horses and clothing merged with the gloom. They chose the longer roundabout route to avoid auls where the appearance of the two djiguits might arouse suspicion.

The steppes and the Chinghis slept in the mists, as if blanketed in bluish silk. The world was quiet and sad, and glancing at the moon, so lonely on her course, Abai sighed. Thoughts of Togzhan filled him with unbearable longing.

He was now a fully-fledged djiguit, but life which had lit up the morning of his youth with Togzhan's beauty and tenderness had at the same time put mountains between them—insurmountable barriers. Their souls had surrendered to one another without hesitation and they had trustfully clasped hands, but their dreams were not

to come true. Was he not fettered, and she as well? Despite all obstacles, they were irresistibly drawn to one another, but it was impossible to forget their fetters, and each wave of desire brought fresh pain, regrets and sadness.

Since his return from his bride Abai had succeeded in conveying his greetings to Togzhan only once. He had begged to see her, but she had tremblingly objected.

"Why? Why should he want to meet me? Does he not understand?" Her words revealed how deeply she had been hurt.

She could not find any justification for him. While it was true that he did not love Dilda, he had returned from her resigned to his fate. Togzhan too had a suitor, a betrothed for whom she did not care, but she had banished all thought of him since she had met Abai. Her heart contracted at the mere thought of the stranger. But Abai had called upon his betrothed! He had crossed a boundary which was to separate them for ever. How she had wept and suffered in those days!

Urging their horses on, Abai and Yerbol approached the zhailyau of the Bokenshi at an hour when people had already retired for the night. It was too late to present themselves as guests.

The broad meadows here were hemmed in on two sides by the hills. As they reached the western slopes, Abai suddenly heard distant singing. The voices were quite distinct—it was a choir, large and harmonious, like that of the women guarding the flocks. The djiguits walked their horses down towards the meadows. The green spaces were dotted with clusters of yurtas and drowsing flocks of sheep. The lights had already been put out and the white tops of the tents gleamed like goose or duck eggs in enormous nests on some deserted island—in groups of five or six, or in some places ten.

The song wafted over the sleeping auls and lost itself in the night haze. The nearer the two riders approached,

the more distinctly did the voices sound. The banks of the brook running through the valley were lined with low bushes, and Abai and Yerbol moved downstream behind them.

Yerbol was now certain that the singing came from the aul of Suyundik. This lay before his own aul, which meant that they would have to pass the very place. Reaching a spot where the brook could be forded they crossed to the other bank and pushed on through the brushwood.

Beyond the field before them they could see Suyundik's aul. Now the voices were very near, and they recognized the tune—it was "The Steed," which Abai and Yerbol had brought from Dilda's aul and which must have been caught up in this district, although the melody the girls were singing with their gentle voices had undergone certain variations.

"They're having a bastangy,"* Yerbol at once surmised. "Just look! And there are the swings." He reined in his horse. "Let's go over to them!"

Abai hesitated.

"Do you think we should?" he asked.

"They'll never imagine we came on purpose," Yerbol reassured him. "I'll find some excuse. Let's go!" He urged his animal on.

Abai was not entirely convinced, but he followed, trusting in his friend's ingenuity.

The swings on the meadow near the aul were surrounded by young people: girls in home-made silken hats and capes of silk and velvet and djiguits, some of whom wore padded jackets thrown loosely over the shoulders. The rings in the hair of the girls filled the air with a delicate tinkling. Happy and festive, the young women in their embroidered kerchiefs were laughing contagiously. Of djiguits there were few, but there were flocks of noisy

* An out-of-door evening party with games and entertainment held by young people when a member of their family leaves on a journey.—*Ed.*

children. Just now "The Steed" was being sung by two girls rocking in a swing.

Emerging from a grove, Abai and Yerbol rode swiftly towards the swings, unnoticed by the girls until they were almost there.

"Let there be happiness, and greater joy!" came the greetings.

The girls turned to look, stopped their games and approached the djiguits. One of them was Asilbek's wife, Karashash.

Yerbol was recognized at once.

"Yerbol! Why, it's Yerbol!"

"Where have you been?" the women asked.

Karashash then recognized Abai.

"Abai!" she exclaimed happily.

At the mention of Abai's name, the young people got off the swings and the singing stopped.

Togzhan, whom Abai had espied long before, came over with her friend, Korimbala. Abai and Togzhan were both too shy to exchange greetings in front of others, but Korimbala was not at all embarrassed. Her earrings glittering, she greeted Abai in a clear cheerful voice.

"Since you have come at the height of the fun, don't keep away," she exhorted. "Get down and join us on the swings."

"Do get down," Karashash begged, smiling.

Abai and Yerbol were still hesitant, and to dispel any suspicion, Yerbol loudly declared:

"We were riding to the auls of the Kokshe now wandering along the Bakanas, but it is late and we have decided to stay the night in my aul."

"Good. So we'll all enjoy ourselves together. Spend the night in our aul! Dismount!" the young women urged them on all sides.

"Lead the horses away and come back quickly," said Karashash, firmly.

"I really don't know..." Yerbol began, but Korimbala broke in:

"Didn't you return from your bride recently, Abai? Do teach us some new songs!"

Her suggestion evoked laughter all round.

Only Togzhan could not laugh. She stood very still, regarding Abai with shining eyes. He wore a thin cape under which one could see a black vest and white shirt. His lambskin hat was topped with silvery silk. Even in the moonlight one could see how lean his face had grown. Seeing Abai so unexpectedly—so handsome and festively arrayed, on his horse with the silver-studded saddle—she found that he was as dear to her heart as ever.

The friends set off—after promising to return at once. Abai's white-maned pacer, which had been prancing impatiently beneath him, ambled smoothly along. The silver of the saddle and the bridle gleamed coldly in the moonlight and dissolved into the darkness. For an instant in the bluish light the animal's magnificent white tail was a cascade of silver, and then the riders were gone. Togzhan stood there, leaning against the swing.

Karashash at once noticed the change that had come over the girl's face, and embraced her to conceal her from the others. As several of her friends approached she pretended to speak to Togzhan about supper and quickly whispered:

"You'd better sing or the others will notice.... Take care."

Korimbala ran up, took Togzhan by the hand and drew her to the swings.

"So that's Abai? I've never seen him before. I'm glad he's come! We'll make him sing the songs of his new kinsmen and learn them all, shall we?"

Togzhan did not reply and Korimbala asked mockingly:

"He's not an aksakal, is he? Why should we be bashful then? You know the saying: 'Those who are not back-

ward get the plums.' Now, where is Abai? I'm going to make him sing right now!"

Abai and Yerbol soon arrived.

Yerbol at once took charge of the games, re-arranging everything to suit himself. With the help of Karashash he placed Abai on a swing with Korimbala.

It was customary for a djiguit to sing when he was with a girl on a swing, and Korimbala asked Abai for "The Steed." She joined in but at once mixed up the tune and the words as well. This immediately aroused comment.

"Abai's singing quite differently!"

"Korimbala, you're mixing things up!"

"First learn the tune and then sing with him!"

But Korimbala was not at all put out.

"Then let Togzhan sing!" she retorted with a smile, and before Togzhan realized what it was all about she had been seized by Korimbala, who seated her in her own place and pushed off the swing as hard as she could, helped by the others.

The swing flew as high as it could go, and Abai began to sing. Togzhan listened carefully to the first two stanzas and joined him in the third, correcting the tune that had been distorted in her aul.

"That's better."

"She's picked it up in no time."

"Sing some more!" cried the girls.

In those brief instants when the light of the moon fell upon Togzhan's features, Abai's eyes caressed them lovingly. The tender flush on her cheeks betrayed the secret of her heart, and with every upward leap of the swing it seemed that Togzhan's winged soul itself was flying to meet her beloved, repeating in eternal rhythm: "I am with you for ever and aye! Who shall tear us asunder?" The song knitted them more closely than the closest of embraces—it was a song of joy itself, of two hearts triumphant in their union. "Look at us! And dare to con-

demn!" said the melody. It was a challenge to all who watched, to the very stars, the shining moon and the universe itself.

Togzhan's voice flowed on surely, irresistibly, and a serene happiness shone in her face. Never once taking her eyes from Abai, she smiled, radiating tenderness and purity of emotion, blessing her beloved because he had come to find her in the gloom that had enveloped her.

Abai at first poured his feelings into the melody. Then came the words—alive, bold and open—an exultant current in the clear stream of song. "Deep within her heart she had for many a day cherished a secret thought—she longed for her friend. Would she now cease to reproach him? He had come back, firm of spirit, radiant with joy—he placed in her hands all his thoughts, his happiness and his entreaties. What would she say to him now? If she were to cast him heartlessly away, then where was pity to be found and where justice? Would she sever the tiny thread of his hopes? Was her beloved so sorely to blame and so sorely to be chastised?"

The song was laden with the hidden thoughts of Abai. Echoing his words, Togzhan trembled as she heard these newborn words, conceived here and now. She understood their meaning well, bowed her head and sang no more.

Abai continued alone. Singing four stanzas to the stirring melody of "The White Birch," he ended on a soft low note, having poured out all the secrets of his heart with the ardour of a poet and the melancholy of a lover. Yerbol could scarcely recognize his friend, who was transformed. He seemed to have grown in stature and to be soaring heavenwards on mighty wings.

The song finished, Abai got down from the swing. Karashash congratulated him, but Abai only smiled, her words failing to penetrate his thoughts, which were far away.

The merriment continued around the swings. Yerbol, too, had thought of some new games: ak-suyek—throw-

ing the dice, and then serek-kulak—the wolf and the lambs. He volunteered to be the wolf who was to carry off the lambs. Abai, who stood joking with the girls, agreed to be one of the lambs.

Yerbol turned out to be a cunning wolf. Having carried off two or three of the girls, he then captured Abai, and as he ran off with his quarry he whispered:

“Just hide in the brushwood and wait for me. I’ll go and steal Togzhan....”

Abai had not long to wait for the abduction of Togzhan. Yerbol seized her at once, but this time his job was more difficult. A crowd of pursuers, screaming at the tops of their voices, descended upon him, headed by Korimbala. Nevertheless, Yerbol expertly led Togzhan away. Having set her down at a spot near Abai, he whispered something and ran back alone.

The moonlight came through the thicket in a myriad of silvery splashes. Abai scarcely noticed how he came upon Togzhan.

The girl fell weeping into his arms, her shoulders trembling with some undefinable fear.

“Wipe away your tears, Togzhan,” begged Abai. He kissed her and pressed her to his breast.

Togzhan raised her eyes to his:

“Hold me tighter.... I have been so lonely....”

“Togzhan! Where are you! I won’t let the wolf have you! Come back!” came Korimbala’s clear voice.

Abai pressed his lips to her feverish face. Korimbala’s laughter could be heard coming nearer.

“Wait for me tomorrow....” he whispered, as he readjusted her hat.

Stealing through the foliage, the moonlight shone in Togzhan’s eyes and on the tears quivering upon her lashes. But when Korimbala reached them the two regarded her calmly with no trace of emotion. Lithe and gay, her hat askew, Korimbala flashed a mischievous smile.

"So that's where you are! I was afraid the wolf would eat my lamb, but it seems that another lamb would eat her!" She laid her head on Togzhan's shoulder laughing.

There was no sting in the jest, but Korimbala was a real chatterbox, and would chatter away among the others too. Abai shuddered at the thought.

"Why blame us, Korimbala? Blame the wolf," he tried to joke. "We were unlucky enough to fall into the clutches of the wolf and shall have to wait until he eats us!"

Korimbala was not to be put off so easily.

"You're telling me stories," she reproached them. "You're hiding something from me, aren't you?"

These words seemed even more dangerous, and Togzhan intervened.

"Oh stop, Korimbala! What nonsense you talk!"

Korimbala turned to her petulantly. Abai decided to try persuasion.

"Some people like to gossip, Korimbala dear! A thoughtless word can do a great deal of harm to your friend. Wouldn't it be wiser to avoid such jokes?"

Korimbala understood at once and laughed again, but now in an embarrassed way, like a kind-hearted little girl who had been caught in a prank and frightened. Had she really offended Togzhan? Her hand around Togzhan's waist, she walked at her side pleading:

"Don't be angry any more! I won't do it again! Ever!"

The three soon rejoined the company. The games were still on but Abai and Yerbol would stay no longer. They intended to rise early, they said, thanked the young people for their friendly reception and left without waiting for the refreshments.

To lend realism to their words they set off for the Bakanas River in the morning, and spent the day at the aul of Karatai. It was only at dusk, when the auls were quiet and the people in their yurtas, that they dared to return.

They arrived noiselessly, unnoticed even by the dogs, and slipped into Yerbol's yurta at the edge of the aul.

When all were fast asleep Abai and Yerbol stole—now almost crawling, now bent double—towards the yurta of Asilbek. They folded back the outer tent flap and began cautiously to undo the inner door. Within the yurta there was someone yet awake. They could hear the tinkle of sholpy and knew that no one in the family wore hair ornaments but Togzhan and her sister-in-law Karashash.

The friends were not mistaken. A familiar voice soon whispered:

"Be quiet!" And a young woman opened the door.

"Abai?"

Abai extended his hand. It was Karashash who caught his hand and led him to the place of honour.

"You had better go. He will return alone. . . ." she whispered to Yerbol.

Yerbol left the tent as noiselessly as he had come.

As Abai touched the silk curtain, Togzhan's warm fingers reached his cheeks. . . . Once in each other's arms, they breathed as one, as if their lips would never part. . . .

The still summer night was gone, and the east was tinged with dawn when Abai and Yerbol left Zhanibek.

The aul was soon far behind. The moon had set and the last of the stars were dimming. The larks wheeling over the steppes filled the air with their trilling chorus.

Abai felt refreshed and light of heart. In a clear and passionate voice he was singing a tender song, both joyous and melancholy. The melody flowed easily, endlessly and the words, which he had never heard before, sprang forth from some inexhaustible source.

Whither they were riding and why he neither knew nor cared. Suddenly he saw the white domes of Togzhan's tents. He finished his song and turned to Yerbol.

The latter was smiling: he could understand the significance of every note of that song! Abai reined his horse and embraced his friend.

"Don't blame me, Yerbol," he said. "I have often heard of happiness and joy, but knew them only last night. But why talk? It is plain for you to see—in my songs I poured out all my secret feelings."

But he did not manage to see Togzhan again. Perhaps Adilbek had heard rumours, or had simply grown suspicious. Whatever the reason, when he returned to his aul and learned that Abai had been at the evening games he was furious:

"What did he come for? What did he want? Had I been here he would not have got off alive!"

Abai grew melancholy, his moon overcast with storm-clouds. There was danger in angering those who were at loggerheads with his father. Finally the auls wandered from their summer grounds and settled in new districts far removed from one another.

Abai felt wretched and solitary. His life was dark—as though someone had extinguished a lamp in his hands, and his flesh wasted on his bones as though he were consumed by a mysterious illness.

His family was worried and decided that it might be better to send him visit his bride again. Abai silently submitted, but his heart was cold and numbed. He set off for Boshan in passive despair, like an outcast going into exile.

In a month and a half he returned with Dilda.

The time was drawing near for the journey back to the winter places. Abai had been away too long and had been too preoccupied to know what was happening in his native auls.

In the autumn Kunanbai had renewed his onslaughts upon his neighbours. His first victim was Kulinshak, whom he could not forgive for having thrashed his

brother Maibasara and for his desertion to the Kotibak at a decisive hour.

Waiting until Kulinshak's aul was on its way to the winter stays and wandering far from the Zhigitek and Kotibak, he suddenly fell upon the caravan and seized all the cattle and valuables.

But even this did not satisfy Kunanbai. As a result of his intrigues two of Kulinshak's "five dare-devils," Kadirbai and Nadanbai, were exiled to Semirechye, while a third son was forced to settle on the outskirts of Zhakip's aul as a hostage. "Kulinshak beat my son and disgraced my brother," argued Kunanbai in justification. As always on such occasions, he gathered about him all the elders of the clans, feasted them prodigiously, unstinting of the fattest sheep and lambs.

When Abai returned everything appeared to be quiet, but deep down the kinsmen's hatred was smoldering all the time. A storm was brewing.



In the Heights



I



EVERAL years had passed. Akilbai, the first son of Abai and Dilda, was born a year after their marriage. Then came their daughter Gulbadan, now a year old, and Dilda was awaiting a third child.

Abai could not accustom himself to the thought that he was the head of a family, and it was this which had prompted Ulzhan to take Akilbai and raise him as a son. The child had learned to speak, but did not recognize Abai as its father; he was a stranger who came to the Great Yurta only to eat, after which he would vanish again. Nor did Abai, for his part, feel either affection or attachment for the child. The boy had come too soon and had signalled the end of Abai's youth.

Abai was only seventeen when his first child was born. He looked upon marriage as a kind of divine visitation that had to be endured. Fatherhood, following in its train, seemed like a hideous jest of fate, almost an act of physical violence on his person. On the day Akilbai was born he could barely endure the congratulations and exclamations.

"You have a child. You are a father! Allah be praised!" Abai's kinsmen would not let him be.

Red and pale by turn, he rushed out, leapt into the saddle and vanished in the steppes. He was away for five days, until the first ecstasies of his family had abated.

Nor was Abai moved by little Gulbadan. She, too, was constantly in the Great Yurta, doted on by the mothers. She looked like Dilda, was always crying, and did not resemble Abai in the least. This noisy infant was delivered to the Young Yurta only at dusk and then spent the nights wailing, as though hoping in this way to attract her father's attention. But Abai would only sigh.

"That wail of hers makes one jump up in the night as if bitten by a scorpion," he complained. And so he began to call the little girl the "yellow scorpion."

The "yellow scorpion" was screaming lustily one evening after being put to bed by Dilda. Though the sun had set and the room was nearly dark, Dilda had not lit the lamp or arranged the beds, but lay resting on a rug beside the child's couch. Gulbadan, just brought from the Great Yurta of the elder mothers, would not go to sleep and voiced her disinclination in a dismal wailing.

Abai entered the room with some friends. A blizzard was raging and the djiguits' clothes were powdered with snow. Entering one behind the other, they brought outside chill into the house. Dilda raised her head: she had heard the footsteps and felt the cold.

"Make the light, Dilda," Abai said as he shook the snow from his cloak at the door. "And either quieten that noisy child or return her to the Great Yurta."

Dilda lit the oil-lamp, laid rugs for the guests and reached for Gulbadan. The servant entered, exchanged whispers with her mistress and began to prepare the food.

Abai's companions were old friends—Yerbol, Zhirenshe and Togzhan's brother Asilbek who had become friendly

with Abai during the past few years. Another guest was Bazaraly, the son of Kaumen. Though he belonged to the Zhigitek, the enemies of Kumanbai, and had defended Bozhei against the Irgizbai with arms in hand on the fateful day that the Zhigitek leader had been whipped, he was on friendly terms with Abai, who was attracted by Bazaraly's daring, by his wisdom and because he had the courage of his conviction. A man of thirty, Bazaraly was the oldest of Abai's friends.

Bazaraly stepped in, removed his cloak, settled on the rug laid for him on the floor and gloomily observed:

"What these frosts are doing to us! Another blizzard today! Blizzards all the time. The djut will spare no one. It will ruin the auls of the poor!"

He was silent, his hand clutching at his long black beard.

Dilda had set up a low round table, around which the djiguits took their places.

Abai had changed greatly with the years. His shoulders were broad and powerful. His tall, well-knit figure suited his sharply defined features. The straight thin nose seemed larger now, and the bold brow had widened at the temples. His elongated eyes shone as clearly as ever, and the fires burning within them lent the young man that expression which so distinguished him from the others. On his swarthy face, reddened by the cold, there was the suggestion of a moustache.

Abai was hardly handsome, but anyone who came into contact with him took to him immediately.

The djiguits might have spent a cheerful evening in the Young Yurta, but Bazaraly's anxious words set them thinking.

Except for Bazaraly, the young men had spent three days together. Bazaraly had arrived that day from the mountain auls where there were many winter places, and Abai wanted more news of them:

"Is the djut very bad there? Has it hit all the auls or only certain of them? Is there much distress among the people?"

Asilbek, Zhirenshe and Yerbol turned to Bazaraly. There was a note of despair in his answer:

"Does the djut ever pick and choose whom it strikes? There is suffering everywhere. The djut is terrible and is laying low the livestock. When we say the people, we mean the greater part and I can tell you that the people are suffering now. This blizzard has lasted for three days. The people were waiting for the spring hoping that it would bring warmer weather, but the storm and the frost have brought back the worst of the winter. Not many will come through this...."

"But surely it's only the sheep that are perishing. What about the cattle?" asked Zhirenshe hopefully.

Bazaraly shrugged his shoulders.

"The Tobikty herds consist mainly of sheep and horses. And the cows have proved to be even weaker than the sheep. The camels too are easily mown down by the djut. How can anyone emerge unscathed?"

They spoke of the calamity all evening. The animals were perishing, but that was not all. The people, too, were beginning to starve. In the Chinghis, Bazaraly had seen the poor roving the auls for food. Some had even turned up here, in Zhidebai. Old men and women had been received in the home of Abai's mothers. They had been given meat and enough grain and millet for two meals.

"Will the djut ruin everyone?" sighed Zhirenshe. "Won't anyone come through unharmed?"

Bazaraly regarded him thoughtfully:

"There'll be some, of course. A white spot may be found even on the blackest horse.... Among the Irgizbai, the Kotibak and the Zhigitek there are auls with good pastures and plenty of land. These have nothing to fear."

To this Yerbol agreed: the Irgizbai would feel the effects least of all. They had plenty of good winter

places and much hay had been stocked up in the autumn. He had seen it.

Abai now, too, joined the talk.

"What good will this do to the others? Who will be consoled by it?" he asked.

"Those who are the strongest are the stoutest," smiled Bazaraly. "The lands seized by Kuneken are now saving the Irgizbai."

"Land!" Abai retorted. "Land taken by force! Do you call that land? It's not land but the tears of those who were robbed!"

There was repressed anger in his words, and Asilbek and Zhirenshe smiled approvingly.

"That's true, Abai-zhan! You've expressed what every man feels but is afraid to say."

Even Bazaraly, oppressed by dark thoughts, seemed to brighten.

Abai was speaking from the heart. He regarded these djiguits as his friends and had long shared his innermost thoughts with them, especially with Yerbol, from whom he had been inseparable in recent years. Zhirenshe and Asilbek were also close friends and were often in his company. This friendship, of course, was not at all to the liking of Kunanbai. "He deliberately finds himself wolf-cubs from the auls which have so recently been our enemies. Fine friends!" he would say of his son, frowning with annoyance.

Since he had begun to analyze his father's actions, Abai found himself drawn to the best men of the auls against which Kunanbai had transgressed. Thanks to them he got to know more about the lives, hopes and aspirations of the people. Zhirenshe and Asilbek were five years older than he, but this did not interfere with his friendship with them or make them any the less candid. Without reserve, they told him all that they had heard from the old men and boldly discussed all their anxieties with him.

Only Bazaraly had not taken part in these friendly talks until this evening. He was convinced that it was Kunanbai who was mostly to blame for the distress of the people. The auls supported by Kunanbai had driven their herds to the pastures of the Irgizbai and would unquestionably preserve them. But the small and landless clans were waging a hopeless struggle. Their herds were roaming hungry in the lifeless steppes. Hitherto he had kept his angry thoughts to himself, but now as he heard Abai's words he could restrain himself no longer. He tried to seek out the causes of the general calamity.

"The people? What are the people? A force to be used when fighting one's rivals, but mere trash when they are needy themselves. It is the people's hands that win victory, but once it is achieved they may only clutch at the dust of the captured herds as they are driven by. And so the people perish, nameless and unknown. Now, too, they are covering the steppes with their bones. Can their plight move the hearts of even one of those whom they yesterday called 'our best sons,' 'our support and stay'? Where is the man who will sorrow for them and take their side?"

Abai was moved by the sincerity of Bazaraly's words. He was amazed by their profound truth, so warmly and eloquently expressed. Bazaraly was a powerfully-built man, daring and sharp of tongue. He was a good singer too, but the elders regarded him as a trouble-maker. "A runaway horse," they called him. "His words are empty, though stinging and spiteful," they said. Abai realized now that it was not true.

The djiguits sat listening grimly. Bazaraly's words were a reproach to them.

"A real man, a man of honour and determination, would defend those who are now driven by the storm," he said. "Kuneken would give up nothing for the people when days were good. But in this time of general distress he should share at least those things he has in abundance. Let him give the people pastures for their cattle,

shelter in his winter homes. Let him share his stocks of food with them. If Baisai, Baidaly and Suyundik alone pull through, apart from the Irgizbai, they will find no peace. The people, left with nothing but the tethers of their cattle, won't move on elsewhere without settling scores. They'll go, of course, but they'll go like the whirlwind, smashing all the yurtas in their way. And if they did otherwise, they would be rabbits and not men."

The djiguits again grew thoughtful, but to Asilbek it seemed that Bazaraly was exaggerating.

"There have always been djuts," he objected. "They are an unavoidable calamity. You can hardly blame ordinary mortals for them. You put all the blame on one man alone, and that is unjust."

Asilbek's words filled Bazaraly with disgust. "As slippery as his father Suyundik," he thought. Instead of arguing he merely raised his eyebrows, looked at Asilbek, and contemptuously shook his head.

Three men suddenly staggered into the room, barely able to keep on their feet. Their clothes were covered with snow, their moustaches and beards glittered with hoarfrost. Even the eyebrows of the first, a tall elderly man in a lambskin coat, were crusted with ice.

It was Darkembai and his two Bokenshi neighbours, the selfsame Darkembai who had meant to shoot Kunanbai at Tokpambet when Bozhei was whipped. This had come to be known among all the Tobikty, and the Irgizbai had never ceased to harass and harm him wherever and whenever possible.

Darkembai did not remove his coat. He had come on an urgent matter.

"Abai, my son," he began, "I have heard that you are good to your kinsmen and that is why I have come. If you were Takezhan, I would not be here. Misfortune has brought me. I have some sheep and they," he gestured to his companions, "have twenty and some thirty head, but even with these small flocks we cannot find shelter

anywhere. We are being driven on, hardly able to walk. On our pastures there is not a blade of grass. The sheep are dropping with hunger, and five have died on the way here."

"Why don't you move on towards the Chinghis?" interjected Asilbek. "You would at least be shielded from the blizzard there."

"But the wind is blowing from the Chinghis and you can't drive weary flocks in the teeth of a blizzard. And how far off are the Chinghis! But Musakul and Zhidebai are near and down the wind. If they let us, we'd find enough fodder on the Musakul and Zhidebai pastures to feed several flocks! I'd dig away the snow and let the sheep graze, and the cattle wouldn't perish there. It's a quiet place and it would save the sheep.... It's our last hope—perhaps they'll let me take the animals there?"

Abai fully understood the hopelessness of his position.

"You're right, bring your flocks there!" he declared immediately.

"That is easily said, my son, but what am I to do? No sooner did I get to Musakul than Takezhan came out to drive us back, and that cutthroat Zhumagul with him. They threatened us with their whips and ordered us off. That's why I've come to you. If I'm to lose my all, I thought, let Abai at least know that his helpless kinsmen are doomed."

Without waiting to hear any more Abai briefly instructed Yerbol:

"Dress warmly, Yerbol, and get on your horse. And you," he turned to Darkembai, "will go back to your flocks! Dilda, tell them to give these men food for the way!"

Dilda at once left the room.

Abai then told Yerbol to convey his sallem to Takezhan: Let him not interfere with Darkembai. Let him allot a pasture for the small flock and restrain Zhumagul. Yerbol dressed quickly and set off with Darkembai.

Takezhan was wintering in Musakul. Married earlier than Abai, he had set up an independent yurta in the same year. He had proved himself to be close-fisted, a man who watched jealously over his land. The herdsmen said that he had even driven the cattle of his mothers from his pastures when no one could see. That year Abai had heard a good deal about Takezhan's misdeeds and was indignant with his elder brother.

Yerbol came back at the height of the blizzard, late at night. He was covered with snow, his short thick beard frost white and his broad nose red with the cold. The flash of his dark eyes spoke of humiliation and anger. Without removing his hat, he sank on one knee to shake the snow from his beard.

"The devil himself is more likely to help a man than Takezhan," he said. "He kept shouting that no strange flocks would set a hoof in Musakul or Zhidebai. And he ordered Zhumagul to whip Darkembai and drive his flocks away! Zhumagul, of course, was more than willing. He came riding up, may he be damned, and is chasing the sheep away right now."

"What about Darkembai? What is he going to do?"

"What can he do? Where can he go on a night like this—in the blizzard?"

"Better die under the whip of Zhumagul than perish as a vagabond!" exclaimed Zhirenshe and Bazanaly, unable to withhold their wrath any longer.

"Another such dog as Zhumagul is not to be found anywhere," continued Yerbol. "'Try to understand,' I begged him, 'wait until the morning,' but he only swore at me."

Yerbol did not tell the whole story. Actually, Takezhan had heaped the vilest insults upon Abai, and Zhumagul had even tried to lay hands upon Yerbol. This he would have done if Darkembai had not desperately blocked Zhumagul's path shouting, "Keep your hands off, or one of us will pay with his blood!" Zhumagul had then ridden aside.

If he told Abai about this, he would set the brothers at each other's throats. Yerbol had no wish to create enmity between kinsmen and in such cases generally preferred to hold his peace, having firmly decided not to drive Abai to extreme measures. Sometimes, long after the event, Abai discovered something his friend had tried to keep from him, and then there would be fierce reproaches. But each time Yerbol would carry on in the same old way, endeavouring to protect Abai from unpleasantness.

But now his feelings were too strong to be concealed. Abai knew his friend and asked no questions. He understood that there was more behind that brief account, more of Takezhan's and Zhumagul's cruelty and viciousness. Ominously pale, he stood staring at Yerbol, thinking hard, and then suddenly sprang to his feet.

The other djiguits looked up inquiringly. What was he going to do?

Scarcely able to breathe, Abai snapped:

"Get up, Yerbol! Come with me!" Hurriedly he began to dress. Donning a light cloak, he drew the sash tight, seized his whip, threw back the door and was gone from the room. Yerbol followed.

Two greys stood pressed to the wall, their heads turned away from the wind. Both were saddled and ready. Abai untethered the first, sprang lightly into the saddle and galloped into the raging blizzard, with Yerbol on his heels.

Zhumagul had succeeded in gathering all the sheep belonging to Darkembai and his companions and was now laying about furiously to drive them from the pasture. But the frozen and hungry animals had bunched together and would not move. Enraged, Zhumagul heaped curses upon them and Darkembai. As to his friends stumbling about in the snow-drifts, he paid no attention to them at all.

Exhausted with hunger and cold, several of the one-year-olds had collapsed and lay motionless, their heads

buried in the snow. Darkembai tried to hurl himself at Zhumagul, but the latter, swift and agile on his well-fed animal, darted like the wind itself among the sheep, lashing mercilessly one side and then another until they fell. If the meek animals could have prayed to God, they would have prayed, in that icy wind under the relentless blows of their enemy, only for the deliverance of death.

When Maibasars had ceased to be the volost chief, Zhumagul, too, had been deposed from his position of messenger and was suddenly bereft of his strength, like a gelding. "Zhumagul is going out of his mind," old Zhumabai had commented jokingly. "He has even promised a sheep to God if only he could pick a quarrel with somebody, but he's still out of luck." In the past two years Zhumagul had nonetheless found a place to his liking. Takezhan had employed him as his noker! True enough, Takezhan did not wield such authority as Maibasars did before, but in the autumn and winter he watched over the land like a dog on a chain. The cruelty shown by this pair against the peaceful defenceless auls was as bestial as that of any volost chief and messenger. They whipped the herdsmen, drove off the animals and roped horses from the herds of others. Takezhan's kinsmen trembled before him, often pleading for mercy.

Darkembai was a great find for Zhumagul and Takezhan. Always spoiling for a fight, this was the very man they wanted, the very same Darkembai they had been after for so long. Charging Zhumagul with the task, Takezhan had raged, "God himself has placed my old enemy Darkembai in my hands."

And so Zhumagul had hurled himself upon the sheep, cursing Darkembai and all his ancestors. But just as he knocked down another sheep, two riders plunged upon him from out of the blizzard, almost as though they had lain in wait for him behind the white screen of the storm.

Not a word was spoken by either of the two. They had not come to ask questions, to wax indignant or to quarrel

with Zhumagul. The first of them flew up and clutched the reins of Zhumagul's horse. Zhumagul roared a protest and raised his whip.

"What are you doing, you scoundrell!" Abai cried, choking with ungovernable rage.

Zhumagul at once recognized Abai, but found that this time friend was worse than foe. Abai's whip whistled through the air and crashed on his head. Zhumagul jerked at the reins to dart out of reach, but Abai had wound the thongs around his left wrist and would not let go. Silently he struck again and again with a heavy hand; the whip was as painfully effective as a club. Better death than such disgrace! Zhumagul raised his hand, but Yerbol, waiting for this, leapt forward and held him fast.

"May Allah bring you happiness," cried Darkembai behind them. "Not all men have become wolves. Let me get my hands on him, just once!" Seizing the hem of Zhumagul's cloak, he tugged so fiercely that Zhumagul toppled over and fell to the snow like a rotten tree-trunk.

Abai ordered the flock to be turned and driven once more towards Musakul. The sheep and their harassed masters at last reached a pasture so well sheltered that the snow-drifts hardly covered the grass.

A haystack stood near and Abai directed the flocks towards it. At the sight of the hay the sheep ran eagerly, but Darkembai was frightened; they would say that he had not only driven his sheep into these pastures unbidden, but had led them to Kunanbai's stacks.

"Drive them back! Don't let them get at the hay," he shouted to his herdsmen.

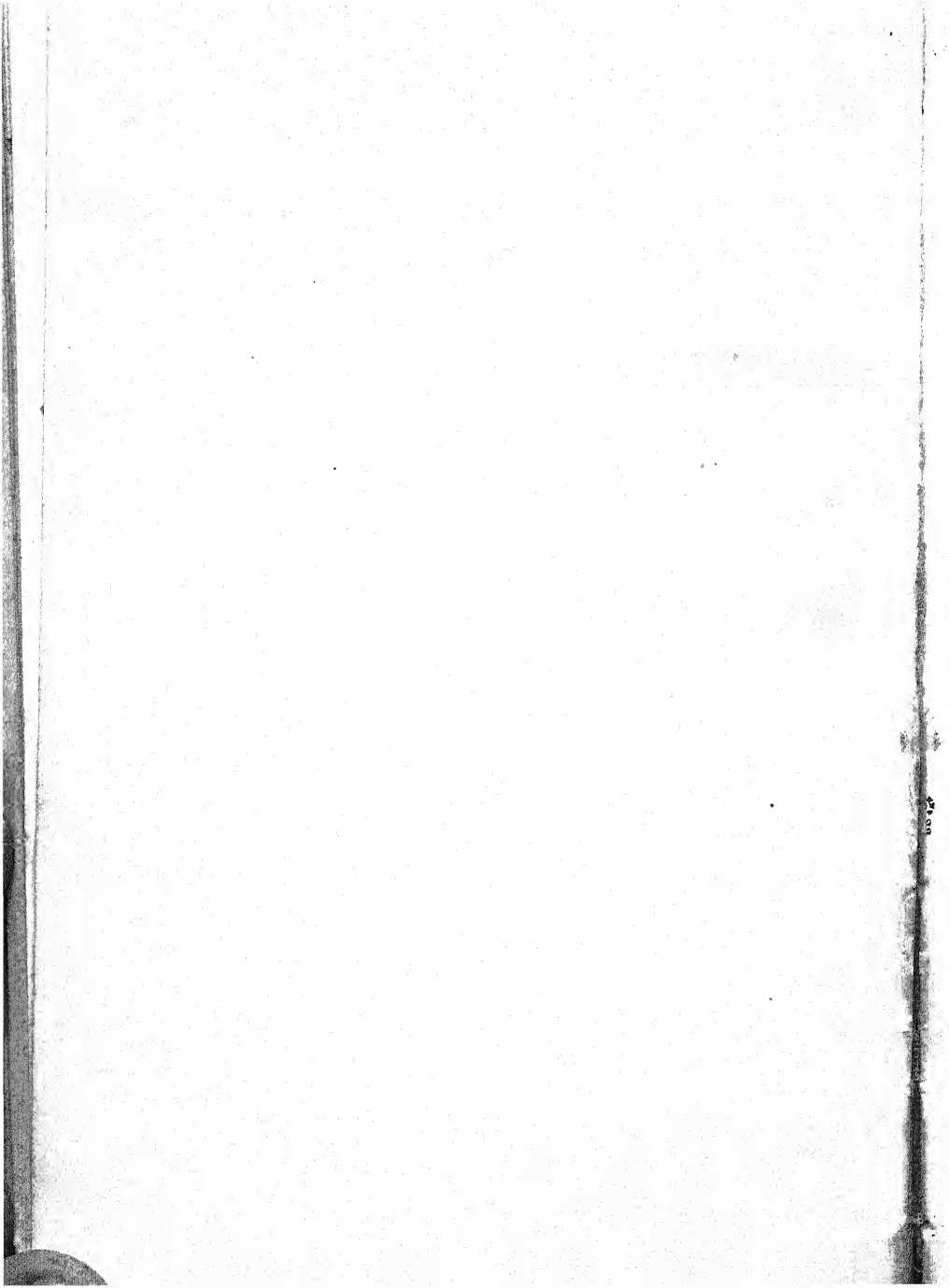
But Abai broke in gruffly:

"Let them—let them feed! Hey, drive them to the rick! What are you afraid of?"

The sheep buried their heads in the fodder, eating voraciously. They would not budge another step.

"Don't drive them anywhere until morning! Let them be until the blizzard's over. I am no less the master of





this hay than Takezhan," Abai reassured. "Let your two neighbours stay with the sheep. They'll keep the flock together. And you get on a horse—that one over there, one of Takezhan's horses, the horse of a miser and a bully—and ride as hard as you can. Tell the surrounding auls. Tell them that I've sent you. Let those whose sheep are too lean to reach the Chinghis, drive their flocks here, to my father's pastures. Let them bring shovels and rakes! The flocks can be saved where the wind does not blow. Let them dig up the snow and get at the fodder. Tell it to all such as you: to the Torgai, the Zhigitek, the Karabatir, the Bokenshi and all who are near. If we must suffer, we'll suffer together. Off with you! As fast as you can! And bring everybody!"

Darkembai sprang into the saddle, and Abai turned upon Zhumagul.

"Let this be the last time that you throw yourself upon people like a vicious dog, you scoundrell! Understand? And tell Takezhan not to torture the hungry! If he doesn't know what to do with his strength, then let him pit it against mine! Tell him just what I have said, even if he bursts! Move on! You'll get there on foot," he commanded.

Zhumagul waded off through the drifts.

Abai and Yerbol then galloped off towards Zhidebai in the face of the wind. The blizzard raged as furiously as ever, lashing their faces and blinding them with snow.

By morning the wind had dropped, and the snow was falling more gently. As though emerging from some fearful ordeal, the red sun rose from behind the pass, fiery ribbons streaming away on either side like trails of blood through the cold morning haze. Having swept relentlessly across the steppes for some days, the wind was reluctant to subside completely, and spasmodic gusts whipped up the powdery snow. But at last there was a lull, a terrifying silence, when the very air seemed to crackle in the frost.

Darkembai knew the value of his instructions and rode hard all night. "Tell it to all such as you..." Those words of Abai had touched him to the heart. He dashed on with the message to all the poor of the clans of the Karabatir, the Torgai, the Borsak and the Zhuantayak. He visited all who owned few—no more than thirty or forty sheep, and did not forget even the last of the needy near the rich lands of Musakul and Zhidebai.

It is usually cold news that a stranger brings on the night of a blizzard, but Darkembai's knock on the window was hope itself.

In three days the blizzard had covered every pasture, and the people were sadly convinced that it would carry off all that remained of their sheep. The winds shrieked over the huts, rattling the windows and keeping every man awake. The poor were at the end of their tether and the old people prayed to God for mercy. No man, woman or child dared undress and none slept by day or by night. They were constantly watching the sheds where they kept their wretched sheep.

A sprig of acacia protruding from the snow would be cut away and carefully brought home, as were the tops of the bushes that still showed above the snow-drifts. Even the rushes on the old barn roofs were taken off and dragged home for the animals. But can thirst be quenched with a drop of water brought on a lark's wing? Which should receive this pitiful sop—a sheep that had lambed prematurely? Or the milch cows? Or the one and only camel? Their poor gatherings could not save the livestock upon which their lives depended.

The thought that aid might come from those who possessed the wide pastures and abundant stocks of hay and other fodder occurred to no one.

And on such a night of despair Darkembai descended upon the auls like a whirlwind, resurrecting long-buried hopes.

By sunrise flocks were on the move towards Kunanbai's pastures from all sides. Abai and Yerbol were on their horses, and rode to meet the people and their herds—in each case a handful of sheep and three or four cows, followed by weary men, women and children.

The sheep were a pitiful sight. The skin hung loosely from their bones and their sides were caked with frozen droppings. Tottering goats fell dead with a last feeble bleat. Behind most of the auls stretched a sad trail from their winter places to the Irgizbai pastures—the gleaming snow was dotted with carcasses.

It is said that sheep can starve for six days. Judging by the number of carcasses these flocks had reached that stage—they were completely exhausted. Within two or three days not one would have been left.

It was difficult for the sheep to push through the deep snow and the herdsmen sent a horse, a camel or a cow ahead for the smaller animals to follow. The sheep suffered such pangs of hunger that those in the lead chewed at the tail of the cow or horse before them.

The men and women who followed were scarcely in a better plight: pale, wan and disheartened, they followed the lean herds like bloodless spectres. The faces of the aged were deeply lined, their tatters flapped in the wind. Not only the women but even the bearded men had wrapped their heads in old rags, and most of them were shod in felt stockings, without boots. But no sooner did they reach the pastures than every man, woman and child fell to clearing away the snow.

All three of Kunanbai's pastures were known for their wealth of rushes, sweet briar and other shrubs. The storm had deposited drifts only at the edges of the pastures. In the middle the snow was not deep and gave way underfoot like sand. Wherever it was raked aside, there was dense, luxuriant vegetation.

Reaching fodder at last, the animals fell upon it avidly. More than fifty auls had come, and by noon Abai and Yer-

bol had found room for most of the herds. Those pastures which Takezhan had so jealously guarded against even a single poor cow were now feeding more than a thousand head of sheep. Of cattle there were few.

Abai was filled with sadness at the sight of these shivering animals and worn-out people. On the wide zhailiau of summer, they had appeared to be living in plenty and were strong and well, but the djut had revealed the extent of their poverty and helplessness.

Most of the households owned only twenty to thirty sheep and three or four head of cattle. These animals had to support their owners all the year round. They were used for hauling, slaughtered for meat, sold to meet urgent needs, skinned for clothing and made use of in other ways. What poverty and need there was, even when the sheep or cattle were unharmed. And such a life as theirs was termed "a prosperous life for the people!" How could one describe it now? Today there was dire need, general suffering, the djut—and Abai could see as never before what a wretched existence was eked out by his own people.

His heart bled for these unfortunates who, having seen to their flocks, were now huddled together among the bushes like rabbits.

Once more he rode through the pastures, pausing before the old people and telling them:

"If you are cold then go to the nearest of the auls. You can warm yourselves there and have something to eat. There are kinsmen all around you! They won't drive you away. Don't be afraid."

The old men and women did not know how to thank Abai enough—he made them feel as though all their troubles were over.

Instead of turning homewards, Abai made the rounds of all the Irgizbai auls near the pastures and everywhere summoned the elders or the old women in charge of the cooking.

"Help your kinsmen. They are in distress," he said. "Prepare hot food for them in all the cauldrons and feed them once a day."

The hungry were looked after, each aul taking care of those who were nearest.

Abai and Yerbol finally reached Takezhan's aul, which was wintering in Musakul, but found that he was not at home. Having learned of all that happened from Zhumagul, he had not stayed to argue with Abai but on the same night had galloped for Karashoky to complain to their father about Abai's arbitrary actions.

Abai did not dismount at Takezhan's house but sent Yerbol in to summon Takezhan's wife. Karazhan soon emerged, her jaw set firmly, her face pale and furious. She was a tall woman with an enormous nose, shrewish and given to making caustic remarks. Not even her husband was spared, who was kept well under her thumb. Though young, she was callous, heartless and a tight-fisted housekeeper. Takezhan indeed could not have found a more suitable mate and after his marriage he quickly amassed wealth. It was Karazhan, moreover, who had disapproved of Ulzhan's generosity and insisted that Takezhan separate from the Great Yurta. The renown and popularity gained by Abai, who had so completely outshone his elder brother Takezhan, was another of her sordest grievances: her hatred for this younger brother-in-law was almost an obsession.

Abai well understood his sister-in-law. He did not greet her, although she advanced to meet him. With the air of one who would stand no nonsense, he brought his horse up against her, as he had done with Zhumagul in the night, and at once got to the point.

"I have heard that your husband has gone to complain about me. If I am guilty of any crime, I shall answer for it myself. But now I have come to charge you with an important matter—and you'll do exactly as I say."

"What matter?"

"The surrounding auls are perishing in the djut. These kinsmen have always mown and stacked your hay, dug your wells, herded your cattle and did all your chares for you. Now they are in distress and you have to help them. We have given them the pastures—their own winter places are far away and the cold is severe. We are also feeding them. Your job is to provide twenty people from four auls with hot food once a day!"

"How can we, Abai? We ourselves have nothing to eat."

"No lies! Only recently the caravan brought you three sacks of flour, and you have five more of wheat! Your stocks of meat have not been touched. I warn you—I am not joking, Karazhan! Share at least a little of your supplies with the hungry! If you prove obstinate, there will be trouble."

"And so you think we should go hungry ourselves?"

Abai flared up:

"Go to the devil if you like, but just dare to refuse! I'll come here to check up every evening! If you refuse you'll have yourself to blame for the consequences. As long as I am here, I am strong enough to make you do as I wish. I shall make you do it—if necessary I shall shame you into it! Is that understood?"

He glared down at her, his hand clutching the whip. Karazhan noticed the gesture and said nothing more.

Abai had assigned Darkembai and his friends to Karazhan the evening before. Now he summoned them and again turned wrathfully to his sister-in-law.

"This is Darkembai! He'll bring those whom I choose to be fed in your aul. You're not only to prepare everything for them yourself, but to make the whole aul take care of them!

"And what are you standing there for like an orphan?" Abai turned on Darkembai. "Don't hem and haw, do you hear! When you come back from your work in the pastures, just ask for food! If they refuse or put you off, come

to me at once! And if you try to shield them—then you're not Darkembai, but just an old woman! Understand?"

Abai spurred his horse to a gallop.

Aided by Yerbol, he kept hard at work all day and returned to Zhidebai at sunset. In his mother's house he found Takezhan and old Zhumabai waiting for him, the former having returned with Kunanbai's instructions.

On his way to the Great Yurta, whence he had been summoned by Ulzhan, Abai noticed intensive preparations underway everywhere—around the houses, the storerooms and the kitchens. The great cauldrons were steaming, three wooden mortars had been set up and the women were pounding wheat in them. Ulzhan had obviously taken the care of the hungry upon herself.

The first batch of them, some twenty, had already been served with hot food. Not wanting to embarrass them with his presence, Abai made for the Great Yurta.

He greeted Zhumabai and presented his salem to him. The meeting between the brothers was more than cold, Abai not so much as deigning to notice Takezhan. Zhumabai conveyed Kunanbai's salem to Abai.

Takezhan had apparently been so angry the night before that he had not even waited to discover everything that Abai had done, and had told Kunanbai only of the clash over Darkembai and Zhumagul. That the poor of all the surrounding auls had been invading his pastures from early morning was as yet unknown to Kunanbai. To Takezhan the mere appearance of Darkembai on his land had seemed incredible and the thought that many others might follow his example had not entered his head. It was simply out of the question! But now he knew the whole story and was virtually mad with rage.

Zhumabai reported to Abai, explaining that Kunanbai considered it wrong to shelter Darkembai. "A kindness shown to one who is unworthy would lead to no good," he had said. "Darkembai once aimed a gun at me. Let him be content that I have left him alone. If Abai wishes

to show kindness, then let him show it to friends and not to such scoundrels. Let him turn Darkembai away." Such were his father's orders.

Far from acquiescing, Abai did not even attempt to make excuses:

"My father says that as a true Moslem he wishes all men well. It is the first virtue of the true believer to help those who are in distress. I have already given my word to the people. I am feeding them. Let my father not regard this as a self-willed action but give it his blessing," he declared firmly.

Takezhan could barely contain himself.

"If you're so righteous, then put on the mullah's turban and collect kushir* for Darkembai!" he burst out.

"If need be I shall. The people are suffering, and I am ready to make the sacrifice."

"So, carry on! Go off a-begging for them!"

"Before I do, I'll give the people all that's mine, and all that's yours too."

"That's just what you've done already! You've put not only Darkembai but everyone else on our pastures! You're not satisfied with beggaring yourself—you want to drag us all down with you! You want to ruin us, don't you—to starve your mothers!"

"Don't you worry about my mothers!" Abai snapped. "D'you hear? My mothers are not marmots in their holes like that stingy hag of yours! They can share wholeheartedly and suffer with the people if need be! Everything I have done has been according to their wishes. Don't worry on their account!"

It was as though a father had spoken to his son: Abai's words sounded like a command. Takezhan would have continued to argue, but Ulzhan intervened.

"Now stop this! Enough squabbling," she broke in sharply and, turning to Zhumabai, added:

* Kushir—the tithe collected by the clergy.—Ed.

"You'd better go back. Before you came, Abai summoned all the hungry. We shall share what we have with them—so far we are not short of food. Tell Kuneken not to worry; we shall give the people our share. Let him not disgrace his son by compelling him to break his word!"

Takezhan said nothing more, although his views had not changed in the least. He had put on his hat and was about to go when Ulzhan noticed the repressed fury within him and raised her voice:

"Just a moment! Tell Karazhan to check her temper and feed the hungry kinsmen as they should be fed! It is not her dowry she is giving away. Let her come to her senses and have a good look about her!"

Takezhan and old Zhumabai rode off. Having inspected the pastures and counted the auls that used them, they set off for Karashoky.

Kunanbai heard them attentively. He was indignant that Abai and his mothers were forgetting themselves. It was clear from Abai's wilful actions that he had lost all sense of proportion, that he reckoned with no one.

On the following day it was Zhakip who came to Zhibebai to convey Kunanbai's another salem to Abai.

The fact that his father had entrusted this second command to his brother Zhakip, who was sent only on important missions, was significant. Kunanbai's kinsmen were wont to estimate the importance of Kunanbai's salems by the messengers they were entrusted to. When it was necessary to break a man and seize his property, he would send Karabas and Kamisbai. If the message was: "Tell him, let him know," he would send such as Zhumabai, though he had at times sent Abai or Kudaiberdy with such messages. If it was a matter of: "Intimidate them, frighten them, scold them severely," it was Maibasars who was chosen. "Explain and persuade!" was the message entrusted to Zhakip in highly important matters concerning entire clans unless indeed it was some

really extraordinary question relating to controversies among the clans. In such cases Karatai was sent.

When Abai saw Zhakip, therefore, he realized that the orders from Karashoky were growing in scale and importance. He was prepared for this, however, and scarcely glancing at Zhakip sat listening, coldly silent.

Before conveying Kunanbai's instructions, Zhakip set forth several considerations of his own. He seemed to be speaking for himself, but Abai very well knew whence the words had come. He had learned to decipher the hidden meanings in his father's salems.

Zhakip explained that there were certain matters in which the initiative must be left to the father and in which a son could only support him. This must be understood quite clearly. The father's good deeds did honour to the son, but wayward actions, disregard of the paternal will, a stubborn striving for independence would reflect no credit on the son.

Abai was unmoved. Surely there were fathers who supported their sons' actions and did all they could to win them honour and respect!

"There are fathers who do not oppress their sons with the weight of their demands, plans and will," he uttered his thoughts aloud.

But Zhakip went on: If one must render aid and permit others to use one's lands, such aid should be rendered to well-to-do auls, to those with considerable herds, in the event of temporary difficulty. The time might come when their aid would be required. But what were all those people worth with whom Abai had taken so much trouble? Lumped together they would not be able to spare a single horse or camel. Such was the opinion of his father, and his view was similar to that expressed by Zhumabai in the first salem.

This argument failed to convince Abai. What Zhakip was speaking of was not aid, but mutual assistance be-

tween friends or close relatives. Abai explained his own attitude and his objections—and did not yield an inch.

"Are you the master of the land and the cattle?" interjected Zhakip. "Was it by your labour that all this was amassed? Do you really intend to squander all that your father had gathered? Tomorrow it may be your own cattle or Takezhan's that will be stricken by the djut. There are your mothers—at least think of them!"

That too was nothing new. But it would have been impolite to repeat to Zhakip what he had answered Takezhan on this point.

"You're right, I must be squandering my mothers' bread," he admitted sarcastically, and glanced at Zereh. "But here sits one of my mothers. She is not only my mother, but yours and my father's too. It is she who is the real master of our property. In other words—we must all obey her wishes. We'll listen to what she has to say, shall we?"

And Abai moved closer to his grandmother.

Old Zereh seemed to have withered away in the past few years, and her face was marked with deep wrinkles. She saw that Abai was leaning towards her and turned her ear to him. Her grandson loudly explained everything, briefly but clearly, and concluded by saying that her word would be final.

Zereh frowned upon Zhakip.

"Convey my salem to my son," she said. "I have not long to live. Am I fated to witness the destruction of my kinsmen who are homeless and hungry? Am I yet to see an ocean of tears shed by orphans and widows? Will my son not feed those who gather at his mother's funeral when I die? Then let him not drive away those poor helpless people; let him consider that they are mourners at my funeral."

Zereh's words caught Zhakip unawares, and he was completely at a loss. But Abai was angry with Zhakip when he saw that his grandmother was so bitter.

"If you are really concerned for Mother Zereh, then don't make her talk of death," he said. "I shall let no one drive away those to whom I have given shelter," he declared firmly.

Zhakup did not dare to cross Zereh, but was resolved to put his nephew to shame.

"Do you realize what you are saying? Do you really mean to stick to this impudence? I hate to see where your words are leading."

"There's no need for further explanations," Abai said, still furious. "You have understood me well enough. We are not children! If those over there are enjoying their new-found happiness, then let them leave us in peace and let us live as we choose!"

In all his life Zhakup had not met a man among the Irgizbai who would have dared to condemn Kunanbai so sharply.

"Enough, my son! Say no more! How shall I convey your words to your father? Never shall I forget that the most awful words I have heard in my life, words that another would tremble to utter, came from you!" With this Zhakup sprang up.

There was a special meaning in Abai's words. He was recalling an ill-advised action on the part of Kunanbai in the winter.

Zhakup was the last messenger; no others came from Karashoky. Under different circumstances these negotiations might have indeed ended otherwise. If things ended happily as they did, it was due precisely to Kunanbai's unexpected behaviour in the winter. Despite his advanced age—he was over sixty—Kunanbai had married a young wife.

Ulzhan and all who surrounded her had fallen out with Kunanbai over this two months before. In Zhidebai there were Ulzhan and Aigiz, in Karashoky—his baibishe Kunkeh, but now he was taking another wife, the seven-

teen-year-old Nurganim. He had told no one of his intention to marry except Karatai.

Karatai's wife had died the previous summer, and when Kunanbai had met him one day he had asked:

"Why don't you marry again?"

Karatai, it appeared, had already been considering the matter.

"Ah, Kunan-zhan," he had said, "what need have I for a woman at my age?"

But Kunanbai had not agreed.

"That's not true, Karatai," he had objected. "When you are young, every beauty, even if she belongs to another, is yours for the asking, but in your old age it is best to have her at your side."

Nor would he let Karatai be until he had seen him safely settled. But on the day of his wedding Karatai had in turn badgered Kunanbai.

"If you speak sincerely then why don't you take a wife yourself? You've been concerned with my comfort, but you need comfort too. All your wives are busy with the children and themselves. You need some young creature to take care of you alone," he insisted.

After endless discussion a bride was chosen, seventeen-year-old Nurganim.

She was the daughter of the Hadji Berdikhozha, who lived with the Sibani tribe. The hadji had come to the Sibani people not long before from Turkestan, and was on excellent terms with both Kunanbai and Karatai. Kunanbai liked him for his knowledge of the holy books, for his wise sayings and interpretations of the Koran, and has often spent his evenings with him.

Nurganim had not yet been betrothed. Despite her youth, she was a well-built girl with attractive features and luxuriant jet-black hair. Her face breathed a tender sweetness and her eyes shone with intelligence and vitality.

Upon the advice of Karatai, Kunanbai decided to wed Nurganim and sent a negotiator to Berdikhozha. Polygamy was not known among the hadji's people and at first he was horrified. Furthermore, his youngest daughter Nurganim was his darling, the one he forgave everything, and when he heard Kunanbai's salem the old man had heatedly exclaimed:

"Do they think I'd give my child to old Kunanbai!"

But his sons, who thought it would be a good thing to be close kinsmen of Kunanbai, did not agree with him, and they harassed their father for three days until they at last obtained his consent to the marriage. No sooner did Kunanbai learn that Berdikhozha had agreed than he sent the bride money and so married Nurganim that same winter.

Ulzhan and Aigiz learned of the new tokal from a man sent by Kunkeh. Ulzhan was indeed far from jealous. She had four grown sons, grandchildren and was not the kind of person to flare up. She no longer looked upon Kunanbai as her husband, but merely as the father of her sons, a person grown close to her through the long years they had shared together. All other feelings for him had long since died within her.

And yet she was opposed to his new marriage. She summoned Zhumabai.

"If he would but once in his life take our advice," she said, "he would not marry; there will be endless wrangling. Let him feel some shame before his children."

When Ulzhan told the news to Abai, the young man shuddered with disgust. "He wants us to stop respecting him as a father—to alienate us," he thought indignantly. "Why doesn't he consider those who are near and dear to him—Grandmother, for instance, or my mother who has been his life's companion? Doesn't he understand that we, the children, will be ashamed to receive a new mother who is younger than any of us?" To Ulzhan he said merely that he could not approve of his father's action and ad-

vised her to send Zhumabai to him with the following answer: "Since he has no regard for us, let him burn alone in the fire into which he has hurled himself, but let him know that he has made us deeply ashamed for him."

On learning Ulzhan's answer, Kunanbai went to Kunkeh. He knew how to approach her.

"Let them go mad," he said, "but you won't behave the same way. Think for yourself and stay with me!"

Kunkeh was always quick to see the petty personal advantages. Ulzhan had many children and a protector in the shape of Zereh. It was to Kunkeh's advantage, therefore, that Kunanbai and Ulzhan should quarrel. She was particularly annoyed that Ulzhan was constantly surrounded by kinsmen and that her house was full of good things. "They'll gain the upper hand by sheer numbers," thought Kunkeh, "and the legacy will go to them." For this she was eternally jealous of Ulzhan. The fact that Kunanbai intended to marry was a great event in the life of the entire family, and she ought undoubtedly to make the most of it. Though her first impulse had been to disapprove of the marriage, she had wisely decided to wait and learn Ulzhan's opinion. If the latter were to consent, Kunkeh might find herself in a quandary and might even lose the support of her husband. For this reason she cunningly took steps to acquaint Ulzhan with everything. The answer she received was highly satisfactory to her: so far from approving, the Great Aul sharply condemned Kunanbai's action. Kunkeh then began to belittle Ulzhan in the eyes of her husband, whose side she now affected to take, pretending to be a reasonable wife who well understood Kunanbai and fully approved of what he had done.

"Bring Nurganim to me," she said solicitously. "Let her stay with me. Ulzhan will make life impossible for her!"

Everything turned out as Kunkeh wished, and Kunanbai took Nurganim to Karashoky. He had not been to Zhidebai for two months and was still estranged from the

Great Aul when Zhidebai and Zhakip came to negotiate with Abai.

His talk with Zhakip had touched Abai on a raw spot. The old wound had been reopened at the sight of the general distress of the people, and both harrowing experiences had brought him into conflict with his father. The young man had exploded and his thrust had gone unexpectedly home—Kunanbai harassed him no more.

Only fifteen days had passed, but they seemed like many months. During that brief end of winter the people had shivered in the bitterest of djuts. The beginning of April, a month which usually brought the first green shoots, was the hardest. The unusual frost and blizzards had caught the people unawares and brought an irreparable calamity that would always be remembered as "the djut of April" or "the djut of the last snow"—so great had the snowfall been in that brief interval.

The herds of the stricken auls had spent fifteen days on Kunanbai's pastures, but then came a change of weather and a warm southern breeze blew over the steppes. Had it come a month earlier, it would have been joyfully welcomed as the harbinger of spring. But now it merely signified the end of the last adversities of winter.

Ignoring Kunanbai's persistent orders, Abai and Ul-zhan devoted themselves heart and soul to the hungry, to their comfort and the care of their flocks, Abai riding among them for days on end. He had grown thin, his face was ruddy with the cold and even swarthier than usual. But his efforts were not in vain; the livestock of the fifty auls survived the djut.

2

The first spring winds quickly thawed the land. Not only the hills but the valleys too discarded their mantle of snow. As though ashamed to have dallied so long, the snow seemed to be hurrying away before the advent of

those days of which it is said, "The earth has unfolded its embrace." The sun began to shine, and the skies were filled with the fleecy clouds of the new season.

The auls sheltering at Zhidebai began to separate for their various winter places. No words could express the people's gratitude to Zereh and Ulzhan for helping them to survive.

When they had gone, Ulzhan reported that her winter stores of meat were exhausted. On the same day the old herdsman Satai counted how many sheep had been lost—two hundred had perished in those fifteen days.

Of the three auls wintering at Zhidebai and Musakul it was only Zereh's Great Aul that sustained such a loss. Takezhan had not lost a single sheep and in the summer brought out the whole of his flock intact.

The disastrous force of a djut does not only affect the livestock grazing near the auls, but also the horses returning from the winter pastures at the first signs of warm weather. The severity of winter must tell fully on these droves as well.

Kunanbai's weary horses were in a fearful state and barely managed to reach Zhidebai. The strongest of the stallions and mares were mere shadows, their hides were shaggy and matted and their legs swollen, their joints bulging. Not a single foal was to be seen in droves, and only the strongest of the horses had survived.

Among the numerous herds of the Tobikty only those of Kunanbai and the Irgizbai in general, and those of Baidaly, Suyundik and Baisai had more or less survived. And even these could scarcely reach the winter places. The living skeletons were strung out across the steppes like a vision of the end of the world, when (as Abai had learned at the madrasah) the dead would rise from their graves and totter off to eternity in their shrouds.

Kunanbai, Baisai and their kinsmen had done everything to preserve their animals. They had taken posses-

sion of the land belonging to the poor families, had driven their droves from the snow-bound pastures and herded them from pasture to pasture. As compared with the others, they had come off very well. Their horses might be lean, but they had survived. The winter was over, and the wasted animals soon began to gain flesh.

The other clans would have considered themselves lucky if their livestock had been in such a state, but many had lost their herds to the very last animal. Among the Torgai, Zhuantayak, Topai, Zhigitek and Bokenshi only seventy to eighty horses returned out of every thousand that had been herded to the winter pastures in the autumn. They had been ravaged by the djut to an even greater extent than the other animals.

The auls were exceedingly gloomy. People ceased to visit one another and lived as though they had been left amidst the wreckage remaining after a hurricane. They were all concerned with one task, and one task only—that of saving what remained of the herds from the killing winds of the early spring.

Only one aul had no need to worry about its horses: Zereh's aul in Zhidebai. Kunanbai had ordered all the horses that had returned from the winter pastures to be driven to the Chinghis and took their care upon himself.

Then came the warm weather, and luxuriant grass sprang up. The decaying carcasses about Zhidebai began to poison the air and were a constant threat of infection and disease. Ulzhan therefore decided to abandon the winter houses for the yurtas.

The evening before they were to have moved, Zereh was suddenly taken ill. Moaning pitifully, the old woman was scarcely able to breathe and by the morning was so weak that she could not stir. Abai and Ulzhan were frightened and would not leave her bedside. They offered her drink, made her comfortable and were reluctant to admit anyone into the house, fearful of tiring her. On the following evening Ulzhan began to lose hope. Saying

nothing to Abai, she sent a messenger to Karashoky. Daughter-in-law and grandson sat by their old mother all night, and in the morning Zereh's failing eyes sought them a last time. For an instant Abai's heart warmed with hope, and he stood looking expectantly at his grandmother, who was trying to say something. Abai could not understand, but Ulzhan could interpret her every movement. They both leaned over the dying woman, who began to whisper indistinctly.

Her strength was gone, but her mind was clear. Only her voice had become almost inaudible.

"Was I ... was I able ... to set a good example ... to you ... in life? Was I ... until my hearing failed ... able to ... set you on the right path? ... What can I do ... now? What do you expect ... from me now ... when my remaining strength ... is going? ... You have ... bent over me ... What do you expect ... of me?"

Each word cost her great effort.

It was better not to weary her with replies. Abai pressed his hands to his breast as he bent low before her. "All that is best, all that is purest in my heart, belongs to you, my sacred mother," his silent gesture declared. He clasped the hands of the frail old woman, then placed her small withered fingers against his cheek and covered them with kisses. Hot tears fell upon them.

"Light of my eyes. ... Apple of my eye."

Turning her eyes towards Ulzhan, she added:

"Take care of your mother. ... And obey her."

Life was ebbing from her. Silent for an instant, she spoke again:

"After all ... he's my only son. ... Let him throw a handful of earth ... upon my grave. ..."

These words were clearly pronounced. Zereh said no more, and Abai understood that this was her last wish concerning Kunanbai. Ulzhan quietly nodded, "All shall be done, never worry. ..."

The life of one who was so dear to them ended before the first rays of dawn.

Not a word was uttered by Ulzhan or Abai until well into the morning. They could not take their eyes away from the wise old face of Zereh, and both were filled with thoughts of their mother who was gone. A deep sadness weighed heavily upon them.

For as long as Abai could remember, this was the first time that a person dear to him had passed away. The features of his aged grandmother had now taken on a deathly hue and yet she seemed as bright and serene as ever, as though death had not laid its hand upon her, as if Zereh had at last achieved a cherished desire and had become the embodiment of tranquillity.

By sunrise everyone, from the oldest to the youngest, had gathered at the house. The grandchildren and daughters-in-law wept silently. The people of the house and the neighbours sighed deeply. During the morning all the kinsmen dwelling in Karashoky and the Chinghis came to the house, the first arrivals being Kunanbai and Kunkeh. By noon the entire clan of the Irgizbai were present.

Zereh's death was a loss to all, yet there was none of the usual violent sobbing, but rather a silence of special reverence for the departed. The poor of all the fifty auls which had received shelter and food from Zereh and Ulzhan during the djut came to the funeral on the following day. The senior mother of the clan was buried with all honours.

Kunanbai and Kunkeh remained in Zhidebai until the seventh day of the ceremonies.

Abai had decided not to entrust the reading of the Koran to a mullah and instead read the holy book himself. In the course of the week he read it through twice. At dinner one day Kunanbai could not help remarking to his son:

"How slowly you read!"

Abai did not answer. Kunanbai was apparently accustomed to the reading of the mullahs, who could have gabbled their way through the Koran three or four times in that period. Abai did not care to explain that he too could have read quickly, but thinking of his grandmother, he had tried to read reverently, slowly, putting meaning into the words.

Alone with her son one day that week, Ulzhan began to speak of Zereh. Abai listened avidly, drinking in her words.

"Our mother," she said, her eyes filling with tears, "set an example of true honour. If not for her, I too should have grown heartless and callous to the needs of the people. We are indebted to her for everything and should treasure her memory always."

It was only now, quite suddenly, that Abai noticed how Ulzhan had aged. It seemed that life had stamped her face with the pain of her hidden thoughts. Silently he nodded his head in agreement.

A week later, after the final readings of the Koran, Kunanbai and his family departed for Karashoky.

Soon afterwards, all the auls set out as usual for the zhailyau. But Abai would not lay aside the Koran until the fortieth day. Keeping aloof from the wandering caravans, he sang mournful songs and sad hymns to her, that splendid soul who had departed. When they reached the mountains, he climbed to the peaks, glanced across the steppes and continued to sing.

The sorrow of those songs shrouded him like the mists of autumn.

When the auls at last crossed the ranges, the people lay exposed before Abai in all their wretched poverty, and the young man was seized with a fresh spasm of pity when he saw what was left of the once prosperous auls. How they had dwindled! Where the herds had barely found sufficient room on the pastures, there were only small knots of animals here and there, lost in the

vast expanses. The herds had grown so small that the auls had been able to cluster together. Most of the camping grounds, pastures and verdant mountain slopes, as well as the broad summer grounds beyond the Chinghis, remained unpopulated. Many beggars appeared, men and women hopelessly sucked into the quagmire of poverty. To Abai it seemed that after old mother Zereh's departure, another great mother lay ill and wasting away—the people.

The fortieth day of mourning for Zereh at last arrived, and all the kinsmen gathered on the broad zhailyau to pay their last respects to the old woman whom they had all loved.

Abai's melancholy and sickly appearance had long been troubling Ulzhan, and when the memorial feast was over and the guests had departed, she approached him.

"You are obsessed by sad thoughts, my son," she said. "How thin you've grown. A young man should not give way to grief like that. Enough brooding! Take yourself in hand. Call Yerbol, get on your horse and visit the auls. You must find something to distract you."

Yerbol arrived, bringing Abai the salem of Asilbek, the son of Suyundik. With great respect Asilbek invited Abai to visit him in his aul. "He has been nowhere since the death of his old mother. Let him stay with us for a while," he had said.

The aul lay at Zhanibek as formerly and when Abai and his friend approached, Asilbek and Adilbek came out to meet them. The guests first presented their salems to the elders in the Great Yurta.

Suyundik received him in the friendliest manner. Only ten days before he and his baibishe had offered up a special prayer in memory of Zereh. He inquired after the health of Ulzhan and her family, and ordered the yurta of Asilbek to be made ready for the guests, so that the young people would feel at ease and could spend their

time together cheerfully and unconstrained by the presence of the elders.

But the yurta was ready for the young people even before instructions had been given. Abai was everywhere joyously received—on his way to the yurta and in the yurta itself. Everyone went out of their way to show him special attention and the most zealous was Karashash, Asilbek's wife. Darkembai also greeted Abai warmly. He treasured the memory of Zereh and spoke of her with the deepest reverence. He remembered the names of all of Abai's children, asked about their health and would not leave the side of the honoured guest. After the "djut of the last snow" Abai was a familiar figure to many of the Bokenshi and Borsak who had found shelter in Zhidebai and Musakul, and their faces always brightened when they met him.

"Light of my eyes," said an old man of the Borsak, "the last djut has spared me and for this I must thank first Allah and then—no one but you!"

"Allah be praised," Darkembai caught him up, his eyes shining with pleasure. "We have as much milk as any! I have just visited thirteen of the auls you sheltered and found that more of their animals had survived than in all the other auls."

In her own yurta Karashash greeted Abai with the warmth due to an old and dear friend. Even Adilbek, who had once fumed against Abai and menaced him behind his back, now seemed to have forgotten old scores. Eager to look after his guest, he opened the door widely before him and with his own hands received his hat and riding-whip. As for Asilbek, Abai had long come to regard him as a brother.

Everyone received the young man as an old and trusted friend. Of the two clans nearest to the Irgizbai—the Zhigitek and the Bokenshi—Abai had always preferred the latter for their exceptional friendliness, and there

was indeed nothing they would not do for those they respected.

Abai's young hosts tried to make his three days' stay as pleasant and varied as possible.

Although Abai sang songs, and laughed and joked, the sadness would not leave his soul, and he made great efforts to conceal this from his friends.

Suyundik's aul was a dear and familiar place and had aroused in him a tumult of memories as he approached Zhanibek. Dreams—hopes—these words brought back old pangs. There was no end to this sorrow, just as there is no healing the wounds of the heart. And there was no forgetting the beloved name of Togzhan and her love.

His very soul searched the house from the moment that he entered the home of Suyundik. Nothing had changed. The people were the same. Togzhan alone was missing. Wild hopes flared up within him. Each rustle at the door made him tremble—was it she? When all was still, it seemed to him that he could distinguish the rhythmic tinkle of the trinkets in her hair.

He had crossed the threshold half-dazed. There before him, was the right side of the yurta. Now, surely, the curtain was about to rise on his happiness once more. . . .

There were the same white silk hangings, there stood the same tall bed with the same carvings of bone, the same ornaments—just as he had expected. There, too, were the same friends—Karashash and Yerbol—and had not the hospitable door once opened before him as quietly as now? But this time their friendship could not help him.

Togzhan was not there.

Abai tried to be gay, he sang songs and took part in the games, but grief stared from his eyes. At times he would stop in the midst of a word and forget to stifle a sigh.

Only Karashash guessed the extent of his sorrow. No dull moan escaped his lips, but his frequent sighs betrayed

the torment in his heart. So helplessly did he sigh at times that it seemed he would weep, and Karashash was torn with compassion.

When they were alone in the yurta for a moment on the third day, she said to him:

"My poor Abai! I can see that you have not forgotten Togzhan. Visiting us you must feel as though you had come to an abandoned and forgotten zhailyau: the auls are long gone and all that is left are the ashes of the camp-fires." Karashash flushed slightly and smiled.

"You are right, zheneshe," answered Abai. "You know what I feel. I can hide nothing from you. You understood everything then, and now, too, your heart has remained true to our friendship! Yes, I can forget nothing, nothing at all! It is all there, before my eyes. Thoughts of her are with me all the time. I feel that Togzhan must come in at any moment and begin to rebuke me..."

"Your love is of a rare kind and my heart is filled with pity for both of you," said Karashash quietly. "In spirit she belongs to you. When she left with her bridegroom, she was praying not for happiness but for death. She concealed nothing from me."

Both reflected sadly.

His last meeting and parting with Togzhan was as fresh in his mind as though it had happened but yesterday.

What a calm and clear evening it had been! Togzhan had come to meet him in the gully at twilight, having summoned him to the aul herself. "Let him come," she had begged. This had been before the last visit of her groom, before she was to leave her native aul, at a time when the groom was expected to arrive any day.

Togzhan—his mild and bashful Togzhan—had come to him that evening brave and determined. Her eyes filled with tears, she had spoken heatedly, quickly, with her head on his breast in child-like confidence as always. He had held her in his arms and listened and listened...

They had loved each other for so long, but how little happiness they had had—how rarely they had met! That evening Togzhan had grieved bitterly over this. She blamed life for it, the creator himself, she cursed everything and her own fate most of all. Abai had been unable to calm her and had gone home with a heavy heart.

Now once more he could clearly visualize her as she had left him that evening, sad and in tears. . . . It seemed to him that he could see every fold in the black silk of her cape and the white hem of her long dress. He could almost hear the song of the sholpy, somewhat muffled by the cape. . . . It was all alive within him—nothing had been forgotten.

"Togzhan, my precious, I shall never forget you . . . never!" he whispered.

To Karashash Abai was more than a friend of the family. She regarded him as her closest kinsman and decided to make a request to her husband, Asilbek.

She was preparing to visit her parents, and certain that her husband was well disposed towards Abai she asked him to invite the young man to join them. Asilbek agreed readily, knowing that the trip would do much to blunt the edge of Abai's grief at the death of Zereh.

"We'll go there, enjoy ourselves and stay as long as we like," he said. "You know what sort of a man Kadirbai is. It will be a fine trip! Come with us," he urged.

Abai had grown fond of Suyundik's family, and not wanting to leave Asilbek and Karashash he promptly consented.

Four days later Karashash and the most respected of the Tobikty djiguits arrived at the aul of Kadirbai.

The young guests were joyously received, and were followed into Kadirbai's yurt by a throng of adults and children. Some wanted to know the news, to ask after the health of their kinsmen and the condition of the auls from which the guests had come, while some were merely

curious to have a look at the guests. Karashash was assailed by a crowd of young women and girls.

Kadirbai was at home, and Abai met him for the first time since Bozhei's feast. The akyn had visibly aged in the past few years and had lost something of his burliness. His hair had grown whiter and the lines had deepened in his face. He had become pale and thin, and only the high bold forehead and straight thin nose reminded one of the old Kadirbai. The akyn first exchanged greetings with Asilbek and Karashash and then turned to receive Abai and Yerbol.

He did not recognize Abai and remembered their former meeting only when he was informed that this was Kunnanbai's son. He then began to talk of Bozhei's memorial feast in such detail that it might have happened only the day before. He concluded by saying:

"Bozhei's memorial feast was one of the most noteworthy of our time! All the guests were pleased and grateful to the hosts."

Most of the talking was done by Kadirbai, who asked the guests in turn about their respective auls and the health of their elders. Abai answered briefly and respectfully. And yet it was he whose duty it was to carry on the conversation; Asilbek was a son-in-law and it was not seeming that he should speak overmuch. Kadirbai's questions, moreover, were addressed mostly to Abai.

When people of neighbouring clans met during this period, their talk invariably touched on the recent djut.

Kadirbai questioned Abai throughout the evening. He wanted to know the effect of "the djut of the last snow" on the Tobikty, which of the auls had suffered most, who had come off lightly, were the people hungry, had they sufficient supplies of the white stuff.* He asked about

* White stuff—the Kazakh expression for all kinds of milk.
—Ed.

everything. The Tobikty were so familiar to him that he knew each of the auls as well as if he were a native tribesman who had merely been away for a while. At times he resembled a doctor listening to the beat of his patient's heart and at the same time demanding to know how the illness had begun, how the patient was sleeping and what his appetite was like.

The precision of Abai's answers astonished both Asilbek and Yerbol. He knew exactly what livestock each aul had, the precise losses and prospects of each family. He remembered it all, as if he had kept an accurate record of the events. His information about the auls gave Kadirbai a complete picture of the life of the Tobikty.

The old man listened attentively, expressing great concern. Truly grieved by the troubles of the neighbouring tribes, he at times shook his head and clicked his tongue.

Things were no better in his own auls. The blizzard had not spared the Siban, and Kadirbai's kinsmen were nearly ruined. Kadirbai had not been rich himself, but in former years had always possessed an abundance of kumys and meat. Now he was compelled to ask for milch horses from the auls which had escaped the effects of the djut. He spoke of the distress of the tribe without concealing his own position.

Not one of the surrounding auls had come through unscathed. The people themselves were like an exhausted herd of cattle unable to rise to their feet. Describing the sad plight of his kinsmen, Kadirbai added:

"We were frisking about like wild horses, but the blizzard has crushed us, we have bent like willows in the storm, weak and pitiful. . . ."

The tea-drinking was over. A sheep was being slaughtered near the yurta. The neighbours who had come to join the guests had returned to their own tents. The girls who had flocked round Karashash had also departed. Only one remained, tall, slender and attractive. The del-

icate line of her eyebrows reminded Abai of Togzhan. Her slightly elongated eyes shone with intelligence, and when she laughed, they lit up, seeming to illuminate the entire yurta. The graceful oval of her face was warmly rosy. Her straight nose and prominent brow at once showed that she was the daughter of Kadirbai.

She was Kuandik, known as the akyn-kiz* of Kadirbai.

While the neighbours and her family were there, Kuandik had been busy with household matters. She had been preparing the tea, serving the guests and helping her mother. Whenever there was a lull in the conversation, she tried to engage the attention of Karashash. She was obviously not in awe of her father or inclined to efface herself—her ringing voice at tea was confident and assured:

"Help yourselves! Why don't you have something? You've eaten so little!" Kuandik was a conscientious hostess.

When the tea things had been removed and the entire family had gathered about the guests, she seated herself near Karashash to question her about Abai of whom she had long known by hearsay.

When the conversation turned upon the djut, Abai spoke at length. His words were deliberate, apt and to the point. He compared the present dire plight of the people with their former life. "As everyone knows," he said, "the djut is an unavoidable misfortune of the wandering Kazakhs. But has anyone ever drawn a lesson from this bitter experience of the people, generation after generation? Has anyone found a way to deliver us from such calamities? Was there ever a man among those whom the people extolled, on whom they depended, who could show them the way out of these misfortunes? Did Kadirbai ever hear of such a man?"

* Akyn-kiz—the girl akyn.

The old akyn had not expected such questions. Reflecting for a moment, he replied in verse:

*Good fortune is but a cycle fleet,
And life, a wind-tossed reed.
The world neath the moon cannot endure;
The gardens will fade, be sure!
And never forget: You too are mortals,
But flowers of Autumn's portals!*

He was speaking of the eternal cycle of life. Abai appreciated his eloquence, but inwardly could not agree. People should not be compared to the short-lived flowers. The Kazakhs were numerous and strong; their future must be made secure. From what Kadirbai went on to say it followed that every nation was at the mercy of an inconstant Fate, but the Kazakhs were her favourites. To Abai this was not convincing. He argued that enlightenment had greatly advanced among other nations and that knowledge was an inexhaustible source of prosperity, a force superior to any djut.

"Did it ever occur to you," he asked, "that the Kazakhs know very little about the lives of other peoples? When a nation knows something about the life of another, it can make use of the best features of that life. From the time of Adam, the best to be produced by one nation has been adopted by other peoples. But we have stood aside, far from the common stream."

Kadirbai and Kuandik exchanged glances. They understood each other without words. Unlike other fathers, the akyn frequently entered into discussion with his daughter, respected her opinion and even sought her advice.

The discussion continued nearly all the evening, and the young djiguit expressed ideas that were entirely new to the old akyn and gave him much food for reflection.

Kadirbai had often had occasion to debate with the old men, but none of them had ever cornered him like this

young djiguit who spoke in so fresh a manner and looked in such a different way at all those things that had been settled long ago and had seemed as clear as the moon. He knew how to argue—and was indeed arguing well and convincingly. One felt compelled to listen.

The talk was resumed on the following day over the morning kumys. Kuandik took no part in the conversation, but obviously favoured Abai's point of view. She often made some remark, with a smile, which showed that her sympathies lay with the guest.

"But just what do you want?" Kadirbai finally demanded. "What is your way out? You've condemned things and pointed out shortcomings. But have you yourself found a way out? If you have, then speak up! I'm ready to listen!"

"What the people need is enlightenment, knowledge," Abai summed up his arguments. "They must be trained and educated. This is no longer the time to dream sweetly and depend on the great camping grounds and pastures. It is time to learn from other nations, from those who have left us behind! That is what we must do!"

Abai had not reached such conclusions on the spur of the moment—they were the fruit of long observations. "It is the only sure path not only for my people, but for me as well," he had often reflected.

Kadirbai had argued differently; in his view learning was merely a matter of treading the safe old track of their forefathers. To know that path well and not to stray from it was all-important.

He would have liked to repeat his objections, but was interrupted by Kuandik.

"There's nothing more to argue about!" she said firmly.

After a long reflection Kadirbai turned to Abai once more:

"You have soared high, my son. Your lips speak the truth. Your aims and aspirations have moved me as well. You are right; every age presses its own demands! And

you are speaking in the language of your own times and thinking for the generations to come. But the question is—to whom shall we turn for knowledge? Who shall set us an example? Life may indeed set us on the wrong path."

Kadirbai said no more. He had seen much of life and had argued for a long time against Abai's deductions. Now he had thought them over, weighed them thoroughly and accepted them.

The two following days passed without arguing. Abai became an eager listener and asked Kadirbai about the akyns he had met in his life, a topic upon which the old man could speak easily and with authority. Warming to the subject, he sang various songs. Whenever his memory failed him, he would turn to his daughter, who promptly supplied the missing line or stanza. She knew them all by heart: the aitis songs, the songs of the contests of eloquence, and "the songs of sadness."

Kadirbai was fond of recalling Sadak, the favourite akyn of his youth.

"His learning was amazing. He had seen everything and experienced everything. We are not fated to understand and remember even a thousandth part of what he said. There was a great shining spirit within him," said the old man.

Abai then questioned Kadirbai about his contest with Sadak, the contest known as "Sadak's aitis with a boy." He knew that the boy had been none other than Kadirbai, but the old akyn would not go into the details.

Vanity and self-praise were alien to Kadirbai, who was just like Sadak, Barlas and Shumek, the akyns who had so deeply moved him. He then spoke of poetry, the gift of God borne by the akyns, and of those immortal songs which reflected the lives, sorrows and hopes of the people through the centuries.

"Listening to the melodies of the kyuis, I can hear how sorrow blends with sorrow. You can hear for your-

self how the melancholy of the soul can speak in melody. Yesterday, my son, you expressed a profound truth! There is not a man who leaves this world satisfied with life, not a man who does not carry away with him his unfulfilled hopes. Many songs have reached us through the centuries and in each of them we hear the selfsame voice. And it is by no means the voice of carefree cheer and thoughtless joy. It is the voice of sadness—the voice of life's longings. . . . Just recall Asankaigy of ancient times and the recent djut of the last snows. In our days too the songs of the akyns are tearful. The happy faces we meet on our way, alas, are too few. . . . All sing of the hurricane of life that sweeps away the yurtas. And small wonder. Have you not spoken of the helplessness of the people? It is not happiness and good fortune that accompany them through life, but sadness and grief—and from these spring our akyns' songs."

It was thus that Kadirbai touched upon the skein which could not be unravelled. The difference in their years vanished—they spoke and thought the same language, and it was only now that the soul of the old akyn was unfolded to Abai.

In his early youth Abai's favourite akyn had been Barlas. Later he had come to know Shozhe and Balta-akyn. After his long talks with Kadirbai he could not help comparing the old man with them. This white-haired singer had great insight, he was perceptive, a deep thinker. He took a broad view of life and resembled the other akyns, though differing from them in some qualities peculiarly his own. But on the main issues, in those that were nearest to a man's heart, they were at one, and to Abai they seemed like lofty peaks of a great range emerging from the distant blue of past centuries.

The old man's fineness of intellect captivated Abai, who came to love him as a father. But this was a father quite unlike the others, one who was not at all inclined to urge: "Tend and preserve the cattle! Become rich! Rear

my descendants and be a stranger to others!" Kadirbai was a father of wisdom. The paths he followed and the advice he gave were bright and honourable.

Each day they had heart-to-heart talks, and Abai could not bring himself to leave the old akyn for a minute. But his companions—Asilbek, Yerbol, Kuandik and Karashash—thought of other things. "Let us go to the yurta of the young people. It will be merrier there," they urged Abai, and Kadirbai himself decided to release the young folk.

"My dear children," he said on the evening of the fourth day, as he reached for his dombra. "I have spoken to you—and my heart has grown lighter. But we old men are like the camel that lies for ever by the gutted house or like the old woman endlessly repeating the same old songs about her sorrows. Are you to listen to that dreary tune much longer? Your hopes and your future lie before you, while our drooping banners have faded. They are not fated to fly from the heights and cannot serve to guide you. The paths which lead to the peaks are visible to you. Scale them bravely! Banish all sadness! Be gay and carefree, seek the unknown and never turn your faces from the heights that await you!"

For some moments the old man sat silent, but then urged:

"Go! Enjoy yourselves! I shall see you off with a poor song of my own." And the dombra once more resounded in Kadirbai's hands.

The young people kept very still, spell-bound by the masterful hand on the instrument, and Kadirbai then began to sing. His voice had grown weak, though its timbre was still moving. In his youth the white-haired akyn must have been an unsurpassed singer. The melody flowed on, once more filled with the age-old sorrow.

The words were the last behest of a father: "My darling daughter and my good brother, be worthy and fine. May you dwell honourably in the memory of man. May those who have suffered, your brothers and little children

about you find a protector in you, in their hour of need. May you shield them like a mighty tree. . . ."

The quavering voice seemed at one with the deepening twilight. Abai was especially stirred by the refrain, which had been composed by Kadirbai many years ago, and laid bare all the treasures in the akyn's heart. Line upon line it rose to its crest like waves breaking endlessly on the shore: "My people! Oh, my people!" Nothing could describe Kadirbai better than those simple words.

The old man sat silent.

Abai, pale with excitement, could not move. His throat contracted and he could not take his eyes from Kadirbai. It seemed to him that the old man had been singing from great and distant heights—the father of the nations addressing them out of the depths of the centuries.

Kuandik noticed the expression on Abai's face and carefully took the dombra from the hands of her father.

"You promised to sing the song 'Be Joyous!' Instead you have again sung 'Weep, My Friends!' But this time we do not want to weep! There are games waiting for us and we're going off to have fun, like it or not!"

Everyone laughed and Abai marvelled over the inexhaustible vitality of Kuandik. If Kadirbai was like the failing light of evening, then she was like the clear noon-day sun.

On their way to the Young Yurta they were joined by many girls and djiguits. The games and other noisy amusements continued there until dawn. They played at "Kerchief" and "Is the Khan a Good Man" and searched for the ring hidden in the mouth of him or her who could not, as a consequence, distinctly pronounce the word "mirshim"; they joined in the game of the "Twisted Girdle," in which a djiguit must guess which of the girls had struck him on the back with it, and vied with one another in rattling off tongue-twisters. Those who lost had to pay a forfeit: to sing a song, to improvise a poem or tell a funny story.

Game followed aitis—a song and poetry contest—and aitis followed game, and so it went on. The Siban people had always been known for their love of games and entertainments, and Kadirbai's aul, from the days of his father, the akyn Aktaidak, had come to be a veritable cradle of new melodies, composed at the song and poetry contests. It was in this cradle that Kuandik had grown up, the very soul of gaiety and song, and her friends could sing as well as she.

In the auls of the Siban and Naiman it had long been customary not to give the girls in marriage while young. Among the neighbouring tribes one could often hear the joke: "She has aged at home like a bride of the Siban." All these girls were gay and chatty and every one of them a superb singer.

In the evening Kuandik was the ring-leader. Her infectious laughter was remarkably musical—like a gay little song. She would not spare a single one of the djiguits and gleefully laid down the forfeits for the losers. But when she was herself the loser she was not at all put out and still laughing paid the penalty ungrudgingly.

Abai and Kuandik were together all evening, competing in songs and verses. The first aitis was started by Kuandik, who challenged Abai in song. He was not used to such contests and since he was accustomed to choosing his words carefully, he was slow at improvisation and at first tried to win by his melodies alone. Many an intricate tune was as yet unknown here, and Abai sang them well and thereby gained the upper hand.

In the next contest Kuandik shifted from the song to the termeh.* Abai knew only one termeh—swift as a head-long gallop. Launching into it, he began swiftly to improvise like Kuandik. Gaining confidence, he found that the words came of themselves. The aitis carried him away and he seemed infused with fresh strength, almost with

* Termeh—recitative in which the melody is of minor importance.

inspiration. Each acting as a stimulus on the other, the girl and the djiguit alternately snatched victory.

Kuandik's dancing eyes and flushed cheeks showed how she was enjoying the contest. Vying with each other, they all but exhausted their stock of mock flattery, pretending to address each other as their choice of heart. Abai even interjected such words as "love" and "beloved," but Kuandik responded with more reserve: "Esteemed guest and respected djiguit, I gladly welcome your visit. Splendid is your family and splendid are you, chosen to bear the gifts of Allah, but mutual esteem—such is the sentiments worthiest of us."

Vying in a contest of wit before a crowd of attentive listeners, they had only been jesting; nevertheless, they had a great deal to say to each other when they were alone. The conversation was begun by Kuandik at the height of the merriment, when all were engrossed in the games or singing songs or laughing.

"A song cannot always be turned nimbly to express one's thoughts, Abai," she said. "And what can one say in the presence of others? The song itself conceals the words. . . . And I have yet many of them for you."

Although this was said in a light-hearted way, to avoid arousing the suspicions of the other young people, it was clear from her words that Kuandik was sincerely drawn to Abai. Earlier, during Abai's talks with Kadirbai, the spark of mutual attraction had blazed between them. Now, as he took her white fingers in his own, he felt her blood pulsing madly and realized how agitated she was. The hands of both young people were trembling.

"Our hearts beat as one, you see," he said. "Your words are delight to me. . . ."

Every smile, jest, movement and sidelong glance expressed their inner exultation. Both beamed with pleasure. In the course of the games they were compelled to exchange kisses as a penalty and the smoldering passion

caught flame and brought the blood rushing to their cheeks.

The young people separated only at dawn, when Kuandik sent Abai to one of the outer yurtas of the aul and joined him there when all were gone. The mistress of the yurta, an old woman, had left to tend the herds and they were alone, two young people fired with a single emotion. They had nothing to say now, and abandoned themselves to the wave of feeling which swept them into its mute embrace.

The games and other entertainments in the aul continued for several days, but the relations of Abai and Kuandik settled down into something more akin to friendliness than love. The spark had been there, but it had not become the fire of passion. Abai preferred not to be alone with Kuandik, and enjoyed her company more when others were there. The frank boldness of her feelings somewhat jarred on him.

In those few days Abai got to know much about Kuandik. She was betrothed to a man of the Kerei tribe. He was married and Kuandik was to be his youngest wife. Her betrothed had called upon her several times, but she felt no love for him and her heart was cold. Sadly, she confessed all this to Abai and opened her young heart to him.

Abai silently reflected. At home there was Dilda, the mother of his children.... It was true that Kuandik seemed to be made for him: she was brilliant, well brought up and charming. Never before had he seen so happy a combination of beauty, intelligence, talent and strength of character. But it was too difficult to go against the will of Kadirbai on the one hand and to forget Dilda and the children on the other.

It was his intellect that reached out to Kuandik, but his heart was untroubled. It was Togzhan, always Togzhan, whose image gave him no peace. She was a vision that never left him, as though jealously guarding her

rights against beautiful Kuandik. And to Abai it seemed that the love awakened within him by Togzhan, who had surrendered her heart to him, and the joy and happiness she had brought him, were never to be repeated in this world. Never would or could her equal be found. The faintest thought of Togzhan made everything within him tremble, and his arms, involuntarily extended to embrace Kuandik, would sink helplessly to his sides.

Kuandik could feel this in some way, and her ardour gradually gave way to friendly attachment. Nevertheless, she was still drawn to the idea of life with Abai.

Unable to make up his mind, Abai asked her advice. If she would permit, he would consult Asilbek and Karashash and do as they suggested. Kuandik agreed.

Abai spoke to Asilbek and Karashash separately. Karashash approved at once—she had long wanted Abai to be happy. But Asilbek objected as strongly as Karashash approved.

"That's impossible," he said. "Dilda is guiltless and Kuneken will never permit her to be slighted. He'll simply forbid you to marry anyone else, in order to avoid a break with Alshinbai. And poor Kuandik will be held in contempt by your family. . . . Just think how painful this would be to her father. God forbid that any others should hear of this but me. Banish the thought of it all right here and now!"

Asilbek said the same to Kuandik, and it seemed that her hopes were not to be fulfilled. On the day of Abai's departure, however, the two young people promised each other that they would seek fresh ways and means to realize their hopes, and parted as sincere friends.

The winter places of the Tobikty lay two days' travel from the aul of Kadirbai.

Abai was loath to leave the happy, hospitable aul, and the farther he rode, the dearer Kuandik seemed to him: she would indeed make a devoted and loving wife.

The zhailyau was quite different this year. It was a gloomy summer, more like autumn. The elders and even Kunanbai did not call the customary gatherings of their kinsmen. The rumours, gossip and squabbles which had beset the Tobikty in the past had abated. There was no reason to argue over camping grounds and pastures. Except for the Irgizbai and the homesteads of Baidaly, Baisai, Suyundik and Karatai, the auls possessed few cattle and there was no need to watch over the verdant pastures on the slopes—once the eternal source of discord. Those who directed the affairs of the tribes had no occasion to display their authority and power. Almost everyone had been reduced to poverty as a result of the djut, and trouble-makers preferred to hold their peace.

"It's better to pretend to grieve for the people," they thought. "Better to sigh with the rest at the clan gatherings and moan over the happy days of the past, to pretend that you are sharing your all and, while distributing sour milk among the people, to keep saying, 'I am feeding the hungry.' In a year when want hangs over the people it is better to be resourceful and flexible. When they have recovered and are in good spirits again, one can plunder them as before."

Such was the wisdom of those who preyed upon the people, the law laid down in the books of felt.*

The mood of the people was indeed uncertain that year. All were gloomy and taciturn, and the worried looks on their faces were not to lift for a long time. Not a single feast had been held on the zhailyau of the Tobikty all summer. Formerly, there had been baiga after baiga, but now even the races of the three-year-olds had been cancelled. When brides were received or the rites of circumcision performed, the repasts were meagre, quite unlike the magnificence of other years.

* The unwritten law laid down in the yurtas of the elders.—*Ed.*

But the quiet was suddenly broken by an astounding rumour. There was talk of thieves—of raids by horse-thieves.

The auls had begun their wanderings towards the autumn pastures and had already covered several laps when the thieving suddenly began. Within five days the droves of Maibasar, Zhakip and even of Kumanbai had lost twenty of the best horses. From aul to aul the news spread like lightning. Those who could afford to do so at once increased the number of watchers over the droves.

It was impossible to catch the thieves. Ordinarily such thieves had difficulty in covering their trades. Someone would be sure to see a hide that had been freshly removed, or the blood and entrails of a slaughtered animal, or even the meat. Rumours travel quickly. But this time there was not a sound—it was as though the horses had been swallowed by the earth.

After discussing the matter, Kumanbai and Zhakip decided that the raiders had come from the neighbouring tribes, the Kerei, Naiman or Siban. This seemed all the more plausible since the auls were on their way to the autumn pastures and the thieves could conveniently get away with the horses unnoticed.

Kumanbai delayed the wandering and sent his scouts to all the neighbouring clans. Small groups of riders headed by Maibasar and Izguty rode hard from clan to clan, ranging as far as they could, but found not a trace. The most skilful and cunning of the djiguits combed the wastelands, inspected the cliffs, the ravines, gullies and even the folds of every mountain and hill, but failed to find the tracks of the thieves.

While the hunt was at its height five more horses vanished from Kumanbai's aul. Nor were the Irgizbai alone to suffer. Baisai and Suyundik too lost several mares.

Each morning, at daybreak, there was new and frightening talk: "They've got away again! More horses gone!"

Kunanbai was beside himself. He too scoured the countryside on horseback, but could find nothing. The scouts returned without results, and the watchers who had spent sleepless nights on the hill-tops could tell him nothing. There was only one thing to do: to reinforce the night patrols. On Kunanbai's orders all the auls moved as one, stopped to camp at the same place and huddled together as closely as they could.

The wandering proceeded rapidly. The auls were in a hurry as though fleeing from a fire in the steppes. It was hoped that the thieves would fall behind and turn their attention to other auls.

The pace of the wandering really did help the auls of the Irgizbai, but the losses of the Zhigitek and Kotibak increased proportionately. And the Irgizbai too continued to lose horses: a couple of two-year-olds and a fat-tailed mare vanished in a single night.

"Now I know," said Kunanbai. But he would not name the thieves.

Baisai and Suyundik were lost in conjectures, consumed with helpless rage. "Keep looking for them. Don't stop searching," Kunanbai's messages urged, but he would not share his suspicions with them. At the same time he sent several spies to the neighbouring clans.

Kunanbai instructed them in person, revealing his intentions to no one. The people he had chosen were least likely to attract attention. To the aul of Karasha of the Zhigitek, for instance, he sent a frail old woman, to the Kotibak an old man whom no one would notice, and to the Torgai an old camel driver.

These old people showed no trace of interest in the thefts and, indeed, pretended to have heard nothing about them. What could inoffensive old people, depending on the mercy of Allah alone, know of such matters? Every evening and morning, however, they made the rounds of all the homes to watch the cooking of the food. This had been their only instruction.

The ruse succeeded. Kunanbai soon came upon the tracks of his enemy, the thieves who had got away with dozens of his horses. His wrath must again be turned against the Zhigitek. It would be Karasha, Kaumen and their families who would have to deal with him now.

His suspicions had proved correct: the thieves belonged to the Zhigitek. It had all been the work of two men: Balagaz and Abilgazy.

Balagaz, the son of Kaumen and elder brother of Bazaraly, was one of the most desperate of the djiguits. Abilgazy was the son of Karasha, whose children, like their father, were fond of noise and quarrels and ready to pick a fight with anyone at a moment's notice. Karasha and Kaumen had in fact precipitated Kunanbai's conflict with Bozhei. As was mentioned, the battle of Tokpambet had been brought about by the thrashing given to his emissaries by Karasha and Kaumen. At all the great gatherings since then, during the Musakul battle and the memorial feast of Bozhei, the sons of Kaumen and Karasha had attracted general attention and invariably aroused all sorts of talk. They were all extremely touchy in matters of honour, and were strong and daring. Bazaraly too had sprung from this nest. He was a sharp-witted man, tall and handsome, and the Zhigitek were justly proud of him. Daring and strength had always been the marks of his family.

As everywhere, the djut had ruined many of the Zhigitek, who possessed few pastures. The auls of Kaumen and Karasha had been completely ruined, and such djiguits as Bazaraly, Balagaz, Abilgazy and Adilkhan had been left with a single horse each.

They had kept to their tents all summer, enduring hunger and want. To ask others for milk was beneath their dignity. They were too proud to beg and had not even approached so near a kinsman as Baidaly. To work for hire seemed the only means of existence, but owing to the ruinous djut no one wanted them. But even had they

found employment, the work would have fed only them and not their families.

Throughout the summer Balagaz and Abilgazy had watched their mothers, sisters-in-law, wives and hungry children wasting away, had listened to the sighing and the moaning. Cursing their fate, they could find no way out. Anger mounted within them and gradually turned into hatred.

Bazaraly correctly understood and aptly expressed what had been troubling them all when, sitting on a hillside among the djiguits one day, he had said with his usual bitter smile:

"Unless we stop quarrelling, our people will always be in need. Just try to set off on the wandering now! Our parents, wives and children would have to go on foot. The last thing left to a man is to go wandering with a single cow, but we can't even do that. How can Allah punish us yet more?"

During the summer Bazaraly had often spoken to the djiguits of the humiliations eating at the hearts of the people. Such talk greatly disturbed Balagaz and Abilgazy and brought them to the verge of despair. Again and again they demanded of Bazaraly: "Tell us what to do! Show us a way out! Say something!" But Bazaraly did not know the answer.

Finally, they worked out their own salvation.

Balagaz and Abilgazy would ride off in the night. For a time Bazaraly suspected nothing. At first it was Maibasar's horses which disappeared and then those of Zhakip. The third victim was Kunanbai.

Emerging from his yurt at dawn after a sleepless night one day, Bazaraly seated himself in the field behind the tents and was soon lost in thought. The aul of Karasha, some five or six yurtas, stood nearby, and in the first rays of morning his train of thought was interrupted by the barking of Aktos, the watch-dog. There was

a note of anger in Aktos's bark, pointing to the presence of an intruder.

"There seems to be a stranger about. I'll have to see," thought Bazaraly and sat waiting.

Two riders soon approached and paused near the Young Yurta of Abilgazy. One of them dismounted, while the other moved on in Bazaraly's direction.

The horse of this djiguit obviously belonged to Balagaz. It was his only horse. A splendid pacer, it had evidently galloped far during the night. The animal was straining at the bit, its sides flecked with foam. "The djiguits have probably been out after the girls," thought Bazaraly.

He continued to sit still, watching silently. No, the djiguits had not been visiting the girls—Balagaz was armed with a soeel. Bazaraly's heart turned over, and full of foreboding, he lay flat and watched carefully. Balagaz reined in near the aul, dismounted and led the horse towards the rocky hills nearby, a splendid natural hiding place.

He evidently meant to conceal his night's trip from the aul. He hid his horse amid the boulders and returned to his yurta on foot. The aul gradually awakened. The people rose and so Bazaraly did not sleep at all that night.

There were convenient hiding places amid the rocks and boulders behind Karasha's aul as well, and Bazaraly decided to inspect them. Soon he came upon another hidden horse, that of Abilgazy. Filled with anger, he turned for home where he maintained a wrathful silence, shuddering from time to time as though with the ague.

He was on tenterhooks until dinner-time, and his forebodings were justified when Kaumen returned from the neighbouring aul with the news that more horses had been stolen from the Irgizbai during the night.

By the time Bazaraly had learned of this, Balagaz, fully rested, had risen from his bed and came out of his

yurta with the others. Bazaraly then put on his coat, tightened the belt as though heartening himself for a long journey, and went to his father's tent.

"I have something to tell you. Let us go out," he said and led Kaumen to the hill.

On their way, he called to Balagaz, who promptly came out. The tall, strong swarthy man seemed cool and composed. Bazaraly looked at him angrily, his usually ruddy features ominously white; his breath came in gasps and his words sounded oddly loud.

"Father, you have taught us that it is possible to live honestly even in a broken-down hovel. I have sworn not to sin no matter how great my need. You, too, have always shrunk from evil and that is your greatest merit. Is it possible that we are fated to live through black days of disgrace now, when you are approaching old age?"

Bazaraly's voice shook. He could not continue.

"What's that? What does he mean?" Kaumen stared at Balagaz uncomprehendingly.

But Balagaz said nothing.

"I have found the thief who stole the horses of Maibasar and last night, those of Irsai," Bazaraly said quickly. "There he stands, your son Balagaz!" He shouted the final words.

"What is he saying? What do you mean?" Kaumen was horrified.

"Yes, yes! I know what I am talking about! Just try to deny it!" he cried to his brother.

Balagaz, too, flared up.

"What have you seen? What do you know? What are you picking on me for? Just speak up and say what has happened," he demanded.

"I saw you return secretly with Abilgazy this morning! Your horses are still hidden in the hills. You're the thief! Confess it! If you're man enough, then tell the truth!"

Balagaz did not try to be evasive.

"Yes. You're right."

Bazaraly shook with indignation and hurled himself upon his brother, his eyes flashing.

Both were as strong as lions, their hands and legs as effective as cudgels. Bazaraly's sudden assault took Balagaz by surprise, but he managed to outwit his brother by aiming a blow at his legs, which sent Bazaraly staggering. He fell upon his knees and Balagaz was on him in a flash, trying to pin him to the earth. But Bazaraly was no less resourceful: bunching together he slipped from his antagonist's grasp and regained his feet. In a single motion he seized Balagaz once more and brought him to the ground. Kneeling on Balagaz's chest he clutched his brother's throat with his right hand and reached with his left for the sheath of his knife.

"For such a thing," he gasped, "I'd kill my own father—not only my brother!" He raised his knife. Balagaz was thrashing about desperately.

But Bazaraly was the stronger and in another moment he would have struck home if his hand had not been caught by his father.

"Wait! You dogs! What are you doing? Get up!" he ordered, dragging Bazaraly away.

Balagaz sprang to his feet. His anger gone, he regarded Bazaraly with bitterness.

"Ah, you scoundrel," he said. "You're a dog—and yet my brother! You, the younger, have trampled me underfoot. There's hardly a name for such an insult! How wise you are! Is that all you could think of?"

Bazaraly relapsed into gloomy silence. Encouraged, Balagaz spoke rapidly, his voice unsteady with indignation:

"When you asked, if I'd stolen the horses, I did not deny it, did I? But had I denied it, what could you have proved? What if I'd said that I'd been to visit the Kerei? Not only Kunanbai, but even Allah himself would never find my trail! I've made sure of that, never fear! There's

no use denying what's been done. But did I do it for myself? I did it to help others! I stole not because I liked it. I hated it. I have nothing and he is rich. He waxed rich on my poverty. Where is my land? Where is my property? And what do these losses mean to him? Just a few drops out of his fortune! When my nearest and dearest are wasting away that's the only way to save them from starvation. I'm not getting rich—I'm saving people! What if I lose my head for this? You can't stop me—not on your life! You think you've caught a petty thief? I'm not a thief—I'm robbing the rich to feed the poor, I'm an avenger! You could condemn me if I were to take something from those who are helpless and have nothing!"

Kaumen could neither object nor agree. He was aghast. No matter how good Balagaz's reasoning might be, Kaumen would never tolerate the cooking of stolen horses in his cauldrons. He decided to drive his son from the aul.

"Get out! Away with you! Separate from my aul! Don't let me see you again," he declared firmly.

The three men separated, each with his own convictions.

In obedience to his father's orders, Balagaz removed his yurta to the aul of Karasha on the same day.

Five days later Kunanbai again lost several horses.

Balagaz's accomplices were few—at first only Abilgazy and Adilkhan. Later, they were joined by four djiguits of the distant Naiman auls. These four were strong, courageous and resourceful. They too had been driven to such actions by need after the djut. They had decided to take horses from the strongest and richest auls and had agreed not to rob the poor. They never appeared together, but rode separately, like ordinary travellers. Another of their devices was that the horses stolen among the Naiman by their accomplices were handed over to them, while Balagaz delivered those taken from the Tobikty to his Naiman friends.

Both parties knew every nook and cranny around, every river and lake, and every deserted track. Having memorized every hill and hummock, every gully and ditch which the ordinary traveller never noticed, they used them to confound their pursuers and put them on the wrong track. In this Balagaz was particularly ingenious and constantly devised new tricks.

The small band of six or seven swept the two regions like a whirlwind. Daring djiguits all, they fell upon their prey with the swiftness of a falcon.

As soon as they discovered their losses in the morning, the auls would take to horse to the last man. As they combed the steppes in twos and threes, they watched all the roads from many vantage points in the hills, certain that they would come upon the tracks of the thieves on their way to the Kerei, Naiman or Karakesek. Look-outs were stationed in the heights for days on end, but they always returned empty-handed.

"Not so much as a fly has flown past or a beetle crawled by," they would say hopelessly.

"The thieves are hiding somewhere in the Chinghis," conjectured others, and searched every bush, with no better results.

Balagaz coolly took the gravest risks. Having made his choice of aul and horses, he would lead the animals some distance away under cover of darkness, never attempting headlong flight or taking them straight to the Naiman. On the contrary, for some three or four days, until the hue and cry died down, he would keep the horses near the aul from which they had been led away—no farther than a flock of sheep is shifted while grazing. Avoiding the hills and the woods, which were sure to attract the attention of the search parties, he would make for the places where the hay had been mown. Furthermore, in each foray he would take only five or six animals and lead them to his djiguits waiting nearby with bridles and horse blankets.

The djiguits would then mount the stolen horses and descend into a hollow, while Balagaz stood guard. When the pursuers appeared from the aul, he would watch calmly to see which way they were going. A motion of his hand was sufficient to send his own djiguits in the opposite direction. Even then, they never took to headlong flight, but cautiously moved from hollow to hollow and cover to cover. At times they were separated from their pursuers by a hummock. And so they kept near the aul they had robbed and often concealed themselves in places already combed by search parties.

After hiding for several days in this manner, Balagaz would finally send the horses to the Naiman with his comrades under cover of dark.

The old woman sent to the aul of Karasha by Kunanbai knew nothing of their tactics, and for a long time could discover no traces at all. Balagaz and his accomplices never slaughtered the horses at home, did not even bring the stolen horses near their own auls. But on one occasion temptation proved too strong for Abilgazy. The pursuers of the Naiman had been left far behind and there seemed to be no danger. Abilgazy and his friends then butchered a two-year-old on the bank of the river. He took home with him only one telshik.*

The titbit was put into a cauldron when everyone had gone to bed, but the old woman caught the smell of horse meat. While it was being cooked she kept away, but when it was ready and about to be served to Abilgazy on a plate, she suddenly entered the yurt, saw the telshik and knew at once that it had come from a two-year-old.

No sooner did Kunanbai learn of this than he sent a messenger to Baidaly: "Karasha is Baidaly's kinsman. Let Baidaly try him himself. The truth is discovered, and there is a witness. Let Baidaly say what he intends to do. If Karasha denies the thefts, then let him make

* Telshik—a rib with some fat.—*Ed.*

Kaumen vouch for Karasha with his oath. Kaumen must know everything. He would not perjure himself. If there is anything that Kunanbai is ready to believe, it is the oath of Kaumen." Such was the salem sent to Baidaly.

Without troubling to question Karasha, Baidaly at once confronted Kaumen, who began to deny everything, insisting that he had nothing to do with Karasha or with Balagaz and had long broken off with them.

But Baidaly persisted:

"Accuse them—or vindicate them! Kunanbai believes your word alone. If you are sure they are innocent, then why not give your oath on it, and protect your kinsmen from unjust accusation!"

And Kaumen suddenly betrayed himself:

"I have no soul to spare for hell," he answered. "I shall not take their side and say that they are innocent."

"Kaumen has refused to give an oath! He says he will not vouch for them! The thieves came from the aul of Karasha!" All the yurtas of the Irgizbai buzzed with talk.

"They call themselves kinsmen and treat us worse than enemies! We can't forgive such a thing. Let them expect no mercy from us! We'll take all they have, we'll burn their auls with their belongings," threatened Maibasar and Zhakip.

"Don't spare them!" they goaded Kunanbai. "Let's hit them as hard as we can!"

But Kunanbai thought otherwise. The year had been exceptionally hard for all and it was necessary to think the matter over seriously. Besides, he had established good terms with Baidaly in recent time. And the thieves, moreover, had been preying not only on the Irgizbai, but on the Kotibak and Bokenshi as well. Nor had Baidaly been spared. It was necessary, therefore, to act in conjunction with him and, if possible, to deal the blow through him. But in any event the blame for the thefts should rest with the Zhigitek alone.

Kunanbai at once checked Maibasars ardour.

"Wait! What's the good of fuming? Be patient. Karasha won't get away!" And he sent another messenger to the Zhigitek.

The emissary this time was Zhumabai, who went first to Baidaly. Kunanbai, he said, wished to convey his salem and to thank Baidaly for having so promptly responded to his first request. Everything had been clarified through Kaumen. Zhumabai then said that Kunanbai would like to summon both Karasha and Abilgazy.

Baidaly did not object.

"Let him speak to them himself as kinsman to kinsmen! He's right. I'll convey his salem to Karasha," he replied.

Kunanbai's invitation was duly forwarded to Karasha and Abilgazy, but neither of the two would obey. Baidaly tried threats but got nowhere. Karasha and his accomplices now appeared doubly guilty—they had stolen horses and now refused to account for their actions.

Kunanbai's position grew stronger.

The Irgizbai sharply watched the aul of Karasha by day and night. Abilgazy, Adilkhan and Balagaz unaccountably vanished.

"They're hiding," persisted the rumour.

Suspicious grew and conjectures multiplied. All absent djiguits of the auls of Karasha and Kaumen were set down as thieves.

"Abilgazy could not be operating alone. He must have a large band. They must be hunted down by the entire people!" So everybody thought and said.

The rumours spread swiftly. Balagaz and Adilkhan had long been regarded as Abilgazy's accomplices. When the latter refused to appear before him, Kunanbai sent for Balagaz and Adilkhan. Through intermediaries, Karasha and Kaumen advised Balagaz to visit Kunanbai too.

But Balagaz would not hear of it. "What can I expect from Kunanbai?" he explained to his friends. "He's been looking for a pretext to make trouble for me for a long time. Why should I go meekly to him, like a lamb? Why should I walk into his trap of my own free will? I regret nothing I have done. First let them catch me and then put on the halter. I've been set down as a scoundrel anyway, and I don't want to be known as an 'obedient scoundrel,' or a 'prudent scoundrel'—I'd rather die first."

The stubbornness of Balagaz and Abilgazy gave Kunanbai food for thought. Formerly he would have arranged a raid and seized all the property of the culprits, but such a thing could not be done now, when most of the people were hungry and in distress. It might have started a conflagration that could not be extinguished.

There was yet another way—he could lodge a complaint with the district authorities. He could summon a police detachment to help capture the culprits and put them in chains, and there would be an end to the matter.

But the laws had changed. The aga-sultanship had been abolished. And there were other innovations too. The Tobikty tribe was now under the jurisdiction of quite another Duan. Since the beginning of the summer they had been under the Semipalatinsk administration. Whereas formerly they had been subordinated to one volost chief, they were now to be divided into three volosts. The new Duan was administered by new men. Kunanbai had not yet met them and had no acquaintances among them. The elections were in the offing and this was decidedly not the time to lodge a complaint against one's own auls. He thought it wiser to wait until after the elections.

Yes, waiting was the best course. But Balagaz's band bore themselves with increasing defiance. He had sent for them twice, but they had refused even to listen to him. "They'll decide that they are untouchable," thought Kunanbai. After long hesitation, he dispatched a party of

reliable djiguits with orders to capture the culprits and bring them to him.

But Balagaz was not to be caught so easily. His djiguits galloped off in all directions. The tired pursuers returned empty-handed, on exhausted horses, with Balagaz and his comrades hot on their heels. This time too they plundered the herds of Kunanbai, but took only a few two-year-olds.

The theft coincided with the day on which the auls departed for the winter stays. The weather was cold; the cows and mares were no longer giving milk and the suffering was even more acute. Stray cattle could easily fall into the hands of the hungry.

Kunanbai expected the elections of the volost administrator to take place any day, and meanwhile he summoned Bazaraly, who, unlike the other Zhigiteks, appeared at once.

Kunanbai received him in the yurta of his new tokal—Nurganim. He had moved to his winter home but recently. The house was warm and the room well arranged, like a Young Yurta. The statuesque Nurganim was enchanting; her dark flashing eyes were particularly beautiful. Hers was the charm of youth, health and well-being. On the right side of her somewhat large nose there was a tiny birthmark which nicely set off the tender flush of her clear features. Her waist, so slender and supple, could have been envied by any woman.

While waiting for Kunanbai to speak, Bazaraly looked attentively at Nurganim. "Where on earth did he find such a tokal?" he wondered.

Nurganim's bearing was modest, but assured. A samovar was brought in on her orders and a table-cloth laid. At tea she looked at her husband and his guest without a trace of bashfulness, and spoke of household matters. Her husband called her Kalmak* and after tea said to her:

* Kalmak—Kalmyk girl.—*Ed.*

"Kalmak, tell them to clear away the tea things. I must talk to Bazaraly."

Nurganim obeyed unhurriedly, sent the servant away and seated herself some distance from Kunanbai with her legs crossed beneath her like a man.

Kunanbai spoke quietly, without raising his voice. He appealed to Bazaraly's pride.

"They will disgrace you. You are a real man and value your honour. What they have done will tarnish your good name. I am sure you will not defend them, nor try to vindicate them. What have you to say?"

Bazaraly answered without hesitation, briefly, his gaze unwavering. His words were calm, restrained, and went home. He had not come to justify the robbers. He condemned them and had therefore broken with them. It was true that Balagaz was his brother, but they had long gone their separate ways and decided never to meet again.

The tea had warmed his blood and Bazaraly's flushed face was exceptionally handsome. His eyes, brilliant and penetrating, his healthy colour, powerful build and long white fingers drew the attention of Nurganim. She felt that those broad shoulders, mighty chest and strong arms would not tolerate compulsion.

Among the younger Tobikty this was the first time that Kunanbai had found a man who could speak to him so freely. Bazaraly's answer and air of independence amazed him. He at once flared up:

"If you condemn them, then help us put an end to these robberies!"

"Yes, of course I condemn them," retorted Bazaraly. "And I have already said so. But what drove them do it? The recent djut and dire need. And the second reason is the injustice which has long been known to the whole of our tribe. Those who stood at the head laid their hands on everything. Others came late and missed their share. And the unprotected, voiceless people got nothing at all.

What has been the result? Those who before the djut had the best of everything came out of it unharmed. And those who had little are now again as helpless as the blind. Has no one considered this? Have the people any elders who feel for them in their distress? That is what I have come to ask you," he said.

Instead of answering the question Bazaraly had plunged in against the current. This was not at all to Kunanbai's liking. Casting a withering look upon his guest, he explained that the calamity had been sent by God, a dictate of unpredicable fate.

"The djut is beyond man's control. Whom can you blame for it? Have not those who have something to share with the people shared with them? But can one help everybody? Worthy men rest content with little. We must submit to the will of the Creator!"

But Bazaraly was not to be overawed by the "will of the Creator." If the people were compelled to groan in distress at the will of God, why should not those who called themselves the protectors of the people give help? Instead they talked only of obedience, of submission. In that way one might indeed sink submissively into the grave! Bazaraly could draw no other conclusions from Kunanbai's exhortations and did not hesitate to say so.

Kunanbai considered it beneath his dignity to argue and wrangle with Bazaraly. He merely frowned, and said firmly:

"My conscience is clear now. I can see that there is no need to spare them. But I'll say this: Balagaz and Abilgazy are asking for trouble. They'll pay for this. I have duly warned you; they'll have no one to blame but themselves!"

Bazaraly understood that the conversation was over. Before rising to go, he turned once more to Kunanbai.

"I have nothing to do with Balagaz. What will be, will be. But that's not what matters. All your life you've been exerting your strength to hold the people in fear by

word and deed, and the people have been exerting theirs to change your mind and soften you. But in vain. We shall never go the same way. We are fated to quarrel eternally," he said, reaching for his hat.

Receiving no answer, he rose unhurriedly, took his leave and walked to the door, under the intent gaze of Nurganim and Kunanbai. Thoughtful yet composed, he went his way without a shadow of anxiety, uneasiness or embarrassment.

Kunanbai continued to stare at the closed door and then turned to Nurganim:

"A remarkable man, Bazaraly! There's not a djiguit here as handsome and clever as he! But his thoughts are a sickness. And he so mismanaged things as to be born the son of such a man of no account as Kaumen! Were he the son of a strong man, he'd be the pride of the tribe."

There was a note of admiration tinged with envy in Kunanbai's words.

Nurganim had been listening to Bazaraly with rapt attention, her husband's words only serving to intensify her interest in the handsome and clever djiguit. Of Kunanbai's admiration and envy, she was inclined to favour the former. As yet unable to understand her own feelings, she felt her heart skip like a young untamed horse straining at the tether.

4

It was said that the district officials would soon arrive to hold elections, and Kunanbai summoned Abai.

The young man had spent the autumn in solitude with his dombra and his music. Whether he played the kyui "The Yellow Saimaka River," "The Tears of Two Girls," or "The Song of the Lark," every note was fraught with meaning. What did his dombra say? It spoke of the

racing camel of Asan-aigy and the languorous melancholy of Alshagir. Those martyrs of old, who though frustrated in their hopes did not resign themselves to circumstances, wept in the tones of his dombra.

Abai's thoughts invariably returned to Kadirbai. He remembered every word of the white-haired akyn and every answer that he himself had made. "What grief the past has left us," Abai had then exclaimed. By this he had meant to say, "It is a great sorrow that resounds in the unfulfilled dreams of the akyns, in their verses and melodies." This was what he thought as his fingers plucked at his dombra, that ancient teller of legends.

He neglected the usual entertainments and even ceased to gather with the young people. When Yerbol visited him, he invited Abai to join in the games and other fun, tempted him with the names of new beautiful girls. But Abai was indifferent. He composed a new song: "Be Quiet, Heart! Be Quiet!" in answer to his friend. But when Yerbol heard it, he began to reason with him.

"Are you really saying good-bye to youth for ever? You're not even twenty-five! What strange notions fill your head? I just don't understand you," he said.

But Abai laughed quietly. As always when alone with his friend, he played the dombra and sang song after song, pouring out his thoughts and feelings. "Be Quiet..." was a song he could repeat day after day.

Yerbol could not agree with the meaning, but liked the words and sometimes joined Abai in "Be Quiet..." For ten days the two djiguits seemed to be taking final leave of their youth.

Yerbol had to go home.

"It is not old age that I want, Yerbol," Abai confided to him as they separated. "Don't you think I value my youth? What can be better than youth? You know it yourself. But to take the place of fleeting childhood and restive youth, I should like to find the youth that is wise and fruitful. There are fresh loves waiting for me too. If

I were to tell you about them, you would see that my heart is full of dreams.... You'll learn about it some day!"

This sounded like a self-revelation.

On that day Abai was summoned by his father, and as Yerbol set off for home, Abai headed his horse towards Karashoky.

It was growing dark when he approached his father's aul. In a ravine overgrown with willows he saw another rider advancing towards him, a tall, broad-shouldered djiguit, none other than his younger brother Ospan. In the growing dusk Abai recognized him only when they came face to face, and was astonished. Although he had seen Ospan day after day he had not noticed how he had grown. At eighteen years of age Ospan was even taller and broader than himself.

Approaching at a gallop, Ospan recognized his brother, reined in and began to relate the news:

"I happened to see Father today and the first thing he did was to say, 'Now then, answer me at once. Do you observe the fasts and say the five daily prayers? Are you doing your duty as a Moslem?' Quite like Munkir and Nankir!* I'd have liked to tell him the truth: 'I'm as innocent of sin and of fasts as a wild horse in the steppes,' but I didn't dare. I was afraid there'd be a storm. So instead, I said, 'Yes, I observe them all!' Father was pleased with this, made me sit at his side and kept me hungry all day. Wasn't I bored! There was nothing to do and so I prayed five times, though without ablutions** and said I was fasting too. In the evening I joined him at the abstention meal and, to console myself, ate all the best things prepared for him. Now I'm riding home! Just look at me, Aga: you see before you the selfsame Ospan

* Munkir and Nankir—according to the Moslem creed, these were the angels who questioned departed spirits as to their deeds on earth.—*Ed.*

** A prayer without ablutions was regarded as sinful.—*Ed.*

who was able to fool even your father!" and the youth shouted with laughter.

Abai joined him in spite of himself, but managed to edge in a gentle jibe.

"If you'd told Father the truth, you wouldn't be sitting there so happy now. Lying seems to be a mighty good thing!"

Still laughing he lashed his horse. At a loss for an answer Ospan did the same.

In Karashoky, Abai did not go at once to his father, but first visited Kunkeh's house. Kudaiberdy, his favourite brother, had been ill for a long time, and Abai decided first to see how he was getting on.

Wracked with coughing, Kudaiberdy lay on a high bed. He had grown a black beard, long and straggling; he was thin, his bones were protruding and his veins swollen in evil dark knots. At the sight of his brother his wan features brightened perceptibly.

Abai was pained at the pitiful appearance of his brother. Removing his cloak, he approached and seated himself near the bed.

The malady which had been sapping his brother's strength had now taken possession of him completely. Abai had seen him only fifteen days before and since then his brother had visibly declined. Reaching for Abai's hand, Kudaiberdy pressed and then stroked it with his weak fingers.

"It is good that you came," he said.

Abai took his brother's hand in both of his and pressed it to his breast. Both were silent, but they understood each other without words. At last Kudaiberdy asked quietly:

"Have you seen Father?"

"Not yet. I came here first," Abai answered.

Three boys ran in from the neighbouring room to salem Abai. These were the sons of Kudaiberdy—Shakke, Shubar and Amir.

Embracing the youngsters, Abai kissed them warmly. Shakke and Shubar already had a tutor, and whenever Abai came he would ask them about their studies. The children were fond of him and not at all bashful in his presence.

Kudaiberdy watched his children as they surrounded Abai and at length, overcome with emotion, he turned his head to the wall. This did not escape Abai. He spoke to the boys for a while, then sent them off to play and again took his place at the bedside.

Kudaiberdy looked sadly after the children as they went off.

"What's to become of them? What will happen if... They are your brothers.* What sort of life awaits each of them? I shall remain their debtor," he said, as though taking leave of his boys.

Hot tears welled up in Abai's eyes, and his voice shook as he said:

"I shall take that debt upon myself, Bakke! I'll carry them through life on my shoulders as best I can!"

"Now don't weep.... There's no need to weep," Kudaiberdy repeated to comfort him.

Both were silent for some moments. Kudaiberdy turned on his side to face Abai, but the movement brought on another spasm of coughing. Abai pulled his blanket over his shoulders and tucked him in.

"Do you know why Father has called you?" Kudaiberdy changed the subject.

"No, Bakke, I know nothing yet."

"Well then, I'll tell you. The officials arrived today; they're going to hold elections. Father has put them up in Zhakip's aul. They say there will be new volosts and new authorities—'rulers.' Father intends to name you. What do you think of it?"

* According to the family traditions of the Kazakhs, no distinction is made between a nephew and a younger brother.—Ed.

"What do you think about it? What do you advise?"

"If you want to know my advice," said Kudaiberdy, reflectively, "I'd refuse. The worth of a man does not at all depend on whether or not he is a ruler. We've seen that for ourselves. Power spoils a man and instead of bringing anything good earns him only curses. Don't sacrifice your youth for nothing!"

"Yes, Bakke. All that is true," agreed Abai readily.

"Takezhan is trying to get himself elected. Let him have the post of volost chief for his pleasure!" concluded Kudaiberdy.

Abai did not leave his brother until nightfall. At the sick man's request, a dombra was brought and Abai played one kyui after another. The boys returned and Abai, hoping that Kudaiberdy would fall asleep, began to tell them the stories of *The Arabian Nights*. The boys clung to him, listening. They were delighted with their uncle who could play the dombra and sing so well. When it was time to go to bed, they insisted on sleeping with him. Amir and Shubar began to quarrel:

"I'm going to sleep with Uncle Abai!"

"No you're not, I'm going to sleep with him myself."

Finally they both climbed under the cover, on his right and his left, and until they went to sleep each tried to embrace Abai and pull him over to his own side.

The official who had arrived to conduct the elections had a long talk with Kunanbai. He was obviously ready to be guided by Kunanbai's opinion in the selection of candidates for the post of volost chief.

From the day of the new law on volost administration Kunanbai had been firmly determined to refuse such a post. In the days of the aga-sultanship, which had governed the entire region, Kunanbai had been enticed by the idea of power. Later he had been deposed and had become the elder of the Tobikty, but even then the entire tribe had lain on the palm of his hand or in the grasp of his fist as he chose.

But the authorities were reaching farther and farther. There was no longer to be a single Tobikty tribe. They were to be split into three volosts. To be the ruler of but a third of the tribe was no great honour, while by refusing the post and keeping aloof, he would undoubtedly preserve his influence over the whole. Such was his first consideration.

But there was a second as well: it was growing increasingly difficult to govern. There were men who would not obey—such as Balagaz. It was necessary to fight them. If he were to punish them himself, hostilities would flare up as of old. It had been bad enough to fight Bozhei, his equal, but to be chosen volost administrator and be compelled to tussle with raw youths seemed beneath his dignity.

They needed a young ruler with a firm grasp.

Let young men fight among themselves. The younger generation had grown up. It was necessary to hand over authority to them and exercise one's will through others.

And, finally, there was a third consideration. He was nearing seventy, and it was time to choose a successor from among his sons.

Considering the matter well, his choice fell on Abai. Here, too, his calculations were shrewd.

Abai had grown up beyond the reach of his influence. His behaviour and speech had shown that a stern judge had arisen behind Kunanbai's shoulders in the person of his son. This had been particularly evident in the past few years, and Abai had indeed completely estranged himself from his father when the latter had married Nurganim. Kunanbai was inclined to blame Ulzhan most of all. "You've brought him up to be such a cold-hearted fellow," he had rebuked her last summer.

But though his son had kept aloof, Kunanbai knew that Abai was intelligent and energetic. It was necessary to win over this son who was drifting away from him. Were he to assume the heavy burden of authority, Abai would

find himself in his father's hands whether he would or no. If Kunanbai could have his way—if his son would but agree, there were many matters beyond the powers of most young men which Abai would be able to handle very well. His father had faith in him and this, indeed, had prompted his decision.

Abai arrived when his father had already finished tea. The cloth had been removed and the rugs on the floor had been freshly swept. Takezhan had forestalled him and already stood resting on one knee beside his father. Like a pious pupil of the madrasah, Kunanbai then dismissed everyone from the room but his sons. Though he spoke to both, it was evident that his words were meant for Abai alone. He was growing old, he said. All his life, the humble days and the years of glory, had been filled with anxiety and struggle. What had he been striving for? For the future of his sons, his children. They were now grown men and it was time they disposed of their own lives. Whomsoever they might acquire in future—friend or foe—would be sure to spring from among their contemporaries. The mysteries of the present age were more accessible to them than to the old men. They would more quickly find the best way forward. Their interests should be safeguarded by both of his sons here in turn, the one today and the other tomorrow. Let them not envy each other and dispute the gains. For the present he, their father, had fixed his choice upon Abai. He believed that Abai would do right to accept the volost.

It was indeed long since Kunanbai had addressed himself so lengthily to Abai.

Abai was silent for a moment, as though in deep contemplation. Then he cleared his throat and said:

"I am grateful to you, Father, for your confidence. You are right to shift the burdens of life to us. It is time that you should be relieved, and you have every right to demand peace at last. But if it is me you have chosen, then I must say that I do not want to be the volost chief. I

have no heart for it. Takezhan is older than I am and more resourceful. He is more suited for the post. Let him accept the volost!"

With the last words Abai turned to Takezhan, who flushed with pleasure but continued in his pose of the submissive pupil, much resembling the mock-pious mulah anticipating rich remuneration at a funeral.

Kunanbai fastened his one eye fiercely upon Abai and twice demanded to know the reason.

Abai's first reply had been: "I am not fit for it." But when his father persisted, he answered in greater detail.

The ruler must be a really mature man, and he, Abai, did not feel himself up to the task. Power in inexperienced hands was like a razor in the hands of a child: the poor thing would either cut itself or injure others. It was not for himself that he feared, but he could not help pitying the people who would find themselves dependent on him, and thus he was obliged to refuse. When his knowledge had sufficiently grown to benefit the people and he truly felt fit for the task, he would not wait for his father to speak, but would come forward and say so himself—he gave his word. But for the time being he begged his father not to persist.

Kunanbai abruptly turned and offered the post to Takezhan, who needed no coaxing and agreed then and there.

Takezhan's nomination was approved in fifteen days and he at once displayed his mettle.

His advisers were numerous: on the one hand there was Kunanbai and on the other Maibasars and Zhakips, who also tried to instruct him.

The new volost chief lost no time in paying a visit to town. Through him Kunanbai conveyed his salutation to Tinibai and begged him to guide his son in city affairs. The Semipalatinsk district chief was on friendly terms with the merchant, and thanks to these connections Takezhan was able to settle a host of matters on his very first visit. Kunanbai had informed the official who had

come to hold the elections about all the problems of the day, and first and foremost about the case of Balagaz and Abilgazy.

Eager to display his authority and power in his new role of ruler, Takezhan bent all his efforts to the struggle against Balagaz and Abilgazy. When he was about to return from the town, the new Semipalatinsk district chief detached five armed police guards to follow him.

Zhumagul, whom Takezhan at once appointed his messenger, and the young djiguit Karpik accompanied the guards as guides. The police force was taken to the volost office late at night to conceal their arrival, and Takezhan and Maibasar assigned them ten djiguits as aids and sent them against the Zhigitek that same night.

Formerly the Tobikty had had to deal with military detachments only in emergencies, and when the armed guards rode through the auls both young and old were seized with fear.

Balagaz and Abilgazy were easily discovered in the Chinghis by the detachment. But the police, who rarely left the town and were unacquainted with the locality, at once showed how helpless they were. They were unable to gallop over hilly terrain, clutched for their saddles, bounced about like bags and fell far behind. Every heap of stones on the top of a hill seemed like an ambush to them. From time to time they drew out enormous spy-glasses and surveyed the scene. Zhumagul who had spotted the fugitives in the distance was exasperated at their indecisiveness. "If I could only whack those glasses of theirs with a soeol," he thought grinding his teeth. But there was nothing he could do. The detachment would go no faster.

Balagaz too realized that and reined his horse to take a look at his pursuers. The Irgizbai were in the lead and he could clearly make out Zhumagul, Karpik and other djiguits. The fugitives therefore decided to strike back.

Abilgazy and Balagaz directed their comrades towards

one of the narrow ravines of the Chinghis, but themselves stayed with Adil Khan behind a cliff.

Certain that the enemy was far away, Zhumagul's detachment straggled along. Balagaz let Zhumagul and Karpik pass and then suddenly fell upon them from the rear. The attackers were three against two. Their birch-tree soeels and black shokpars described only two or three arcs. Strong and agile, Balagaz and his comrades at once unsaddled their opponents and galloped off with their horses.

The police guards dared not pursue an enemy that had made such short work of their vanguard. Huddled together, they gave up the chase and headed for the auls from which they had come.

Takezhan wreaked vengeance by seizing the property of the peaceful population. Zhumagul, Karpik and ten other djiguits fell upon the auls of Karasha and Kaumen and drove away all their cattle. The same treatment was meted out to Urkimbai, and the poor were deprived of their last milch cow. Never before had such a thing happened. There had been punitive expeditions in the past, but only against the culprits, in accordance with the Kazakh saying: "He who wrought evil with his own hand shall pay with his own neck." Takezhan had done something unheard of: he had taken the last means of livelihood from the old men, women and children.

The whole of the Zhigitek were incensed.

"That's the way things are! That's where the wind is blowing! The stork is blamed for the dog's doings!" said the Zhigitek bitterly.

The Kotibak and Bokenshi, allied to the Zhigitek, were equally outraged. And most unjust of all was the fact that the victims were such innocent men as Kaumen, whose break with Balagaz was well known, or Urkimbai, who had nothing to do with the thieves.

The people could not say just who was to blame for such injustice, but feelings ran high all the same.

"Fresh misfortunes have come upon us," they complained.

Takezhan had transferred the volost office to his own aul in Musakul. He had surrounded himself not only with messengers and interpreters, but also with such advisers as Maibasars and Zhakip—a grand and numerous suite. All of them had suffered at the hands of Balagaz at one time or another and were eager to settle scores with the whole of the Zhigitek.

The detachment from the town had actually been sent to intimidate the people and menace the thieves.

On the eve of their departure for Semipalatinsk three days later, the guards once more went out in search of the outlaws, but found no trace of Balagaz or his djiguits.

Having seen them on their way, Takezhan set to work drawing up the documents and complaints to be lodged in Semipalatinsk.

Abai had been incensed when Takezhan summoned the detachment, but when he heard of his other actions, he lost patience and rode post-haste to Musakul.

There he found Bazaraly expostulating with Takezhan.

"If you are so eager to fight," Bazaraly urged, "then fight the criminals. But why injure peaceful people who are poor enough as it is? Return their cattle unless you want the women and children to die of hunger! Their lives depend on the milch cattle you have taken from them. Try to understand. . . ."

But Takezhan would not even speak to him.

"That's only the beginning," he said. "I'll not rest until I've caught Balagaz and Abilgazy! It's not I who am making trouble, but they," he stormed.

Bazaraly exploded:

"Why don't you speak plainly and say that you'll put the entire people in chains until you've caught Balagaz."

"Since when have you become a court of arbitration?" sneered Takezhan. "Who appointed you? You should re-

joyce that I do not take you as a hostage for Balagaz. Is that not enough for you? If that's the way things stand, let me tell you this: If Balagaz commits any more of his outrages, you'll have to answer for them! And you won't wriggle out of it!"

But Bazaraly was not frightened.

"I thought I was talking to an intelligent man, but it seems I'm faced only by a blind pole-axe. I'm sorry I came to you! It would have been enough to talk to your messengers and return home!" he retorted, rising to leave.

Abai started, as though he would have liked to cut in and tell his brother that he was wrong, but Takezhan snapped:

"Keep out of this!"

In the office Abai saw the documents. Nothing had been forgotten that might bring misfortune upon the Zhigitk: the sentences, signatures and seals, everything was ready to be sent to the town that evening by the feather post." Abai at once informed Bazaraly.

"These fools," he said, "are cooking up a terrible affair. They're paving the way to a new Tokpambet and Musakul. But let the people not worry or be afraid, Bazekeh. A wind is not yet a storm."

Bazaraly was about to leave without accomplishing his mission to help the people who had lost their last cattle, but Abai begged him to wait. Taking Maibasars, Zhakip and Takezhan aside, he pounced on the new volost chief.

"When dealing with your equals, you're a coward, but with women and children, a hero! You've taken the last drop of milk from those who were ruined by the djut. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Do you think your superiors will be pleased with you for having roused the entire people? Just try to keep your post after this!" he warned Takezhan and then faced Maibasars. "The advice is all yours, of course? How can you be so mean? Return the cattle to the people immediately!"

Takezhan was furious, but afraid to argue. He had not forgotten how his father had pleaded with Abai to accept the volost. What if he, Takezhan, proved wrong this time, and Abai right? It was very risky. Who could tell what Kunanbai would do? He might hand over the volost to Abai. He wished he knew his father's opinion, but nothing had been heard from him lately and there was no telling whether or not he would approve the measures taken against the Zhigitek. Takezhan hesitated to answer, and pretended to be pondering over his brother's words.

It was clear that the danger Abai had pointed out to them had to be taken seriously. Takezhan and Maibasars were still inclined to resist, but Zhakip gave the matter careful consideration. When Abai had left, he began to argue.

"The case of Abilgazy and Balagaz can be handed on to the district chief. Just get the papers ready and send them off to Semipalatinsk as quickly as possible. But it would be as well if we only harassed the culprits themselves. We'd better return the cattle," he advised.

The herds were restored to their owners—and Bazaraly's mission was accomplished. But he told the Zhigitek of Takezhan's threats and added that legal action had been brought against Balagaz. Though he had broken with his brother, Bazaraly sent a man to the aul of Karasha every day to keep him abreast of developments.

Three days later, the whole of the Chinghis was horrified by the news that urgent mail, sent by Takezhan to Semipalatinsk, had been stolen on the way. It had happened in the Mukir Ravine on the border-lands of the Tobikty. "There will be no end of trouble now!" was the general opinion.

The documents drawn up against Balagaz and his comrades by Takezhan had in fact been dispatched by the urgent mail. Zhumagul, Karpik and another djiguit had galloped off from Musakul with the prescribed feathers.

in their hats, their saddle-bags filled to bursting. Changing horses on the way, they had everywhere raised the cry: "Special post! Feather post!"

The messengers had been riding hard day and night, hoping to reach Semipalatinsk after dark on the following day, and were already approaching the narrow Mukir Ravine when they met three other riders. As they came within arm's reach, the strangers suddenly seized them by the collars and hurled them to the ground.

It was three against three. The attackers said nothing and their faces were covered with black cloths. The messengers were overcome, the strangers seized the bags and galloped away.

The news about Takezhan's complaints and the "feather post" had been brought to Adilkhan's aul. Without troubling to consult Balagaz and Abilgazy, he had immediately set out on the tracks of the mail party. He dogged their steps, and when they had stopped for tea had gone on ahead. Adilkhan was accompanied by two able djiguits of the Naiman tribe, and the three of them were easily able to carry out their plan, after which they returned to the Chinghis.

In his anger Adilkhan had quite forgotten that robbery of the posts was subject to extremely severe penalties. But whatever the outcome, the deed had been done.

Adilkhan then took cover in one of the auls on the border between the territory of the Siban and the Tobikty which had long served as hiding places for Balagaz and his friends. Balagaz had first come here when the starving people, exhausted by the djut, had been reduced to trapping small animals in the fields, and had brought them both milch cows and mounts.

Adilkhan found Abilgazy and Balagaz waiting for him. The two were delighted at his daring and decided that there was no need to regret the robbery.

"The volost chief will probably go to town again. He'll no doubt raise a fuss, and they'll send fresh guards.

We'd be fools to wait for them! We'll let our horses recover for three or four days, pick up a supply of food and ride to the Naiman people. The cold weather is near. We'll stay with the Naiman people until summer and then all will be quiet," they assured one another.

But Kunanbai proved more cunning than they had expected. He summoned Takezhan and all the old men of the Irgizbai, together with Baisai, Suyundik and other kinsmen among the elders.

"I'll not stop until I've hunted them to earth," he said, quivering with rage. "Who will dare uphold them now? Let someone try to take the thieves from my hands! They'll rot in exile—or my name's not Kunanbai!"

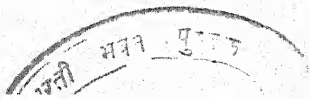
He did not trouble to consult those whom he had gathered, but merely informed them of his intentions and demanded their support. To impress them the more, he commanded Takezhan:

"Call the police guards! Let them put the rebels down!"

The elders returned to their auls, expecting the arrival of another armed detachment from day to day. But Kunanbai had merely mentioned such a detachment in order to throw the others off the scent. Very secretly he organized a force of thirty djiguits on the very day that Adilkhan joined Balagaz and his comrades.

Kunanbai's djiguits set off that night with six hounds. They were told to conceal their weapons—shokpars, bludgeons and sabres—in their dress. The djiguits took no more than one hour to prepare for their sally and then crossed the Chinghis. Whereas Takezhan had not the faintest idea of Balagaz's whereabouts, Kunanbai knew very well where they were hiding, though he had apparently taken no part in hunting the thieves.

By morning the djiguits were approaching the aul where Adilkhan and his friends were in hiding. Balagaz's look-out saw the riders coming over the hills with their dogs, but took them for hunters. There was always hunting in the Chinghis until the snows had come to stay.



and Izguty, who led the detachment, was able to take them right to the aul undisturbed.

Baring his long sabre, he rushed into the house where the fugitives, ten of them, were peacefully sleeping.

Izguty struck Balagaz with the flat of his sabre. The latter started up with the cry:

"All is lost! I am finished!"

It was indeed the end. Every one of them was caught.

They were led out of the house and put on the horses in pairs, and to each of the horses carrying prisoners were five or six guards. Izguty, his sabre drawn, kept close to Balagaz.

Of the ten captured men only one made his escape in the evening of that day—Abilgazy. He whispered something to the comrade seated on the horse with him and they managed to fall back a little behind the others. The djiguit riding alongside was napping in his saddle after his sleepless night and the anxieties of the day, his shokpar thrust carelessly under his knee.

When the party entered a tortuous ravine flanked by great walls of rock, Abilgazy suddenly snatched the shokpar from under the knee of the unwary djiguit, pulled him down and in a single bound gained the back of his adversary's horse. Once off his horse, it took some moments for the djiguit to get his breath back, and then he snatched at the reins of the tired horse carrying the other prisoner and began to shout.

But Abilgazy was gone.

When the men in the lead had realized what had happened and discussed what should be done, Abilgazy had travelled far. The dusk was deepening and, fearful of losing his other prisoners while chasing the runaway, Izguty ordered his party to move on, henceforward riding in the rear himself.

On approaching Karashoky, he sent a messenger to Kunanbai to inform him that the thieves had been cap-

tured and to ask whether he wanted to question them himself.

Kunanbai's instructions were brief.

"Take them to Musakul and tell Takezhan and his scribe to send them on to Semipalatinsk tonight. Let them be placed in carts, taken to town under heavy guard and put into custody. Let everything be done without hesitation or delay!"

Takezhan did exactly as he was told. The captured djiguits were put on carts in the dead of night and taken to Semipalatinsk.

The people thus learned of Balagaz's capture only when he and his djiguits were far removed from them.

Kunanbai and the new volost chief were now like tomcats snarling and spitting over a captured mouse. They spoke of the events with exasperation and in injured tones. By the third day they were both continually insisting:

"Only our worst enemies could have acted as they. They purposely destroyed official papers so that Takezhan would be brought to trial!"

"They wanted to ruin Takezhan! A monstrous affair!"

But all this thundering was an artificially raised storm. These clouds of indignation were gathered to conceal quite a different purpose.

Quarrels had occurred in the past but never had an enemy been sent to prison or distant exile. Those who surrounded Kunanbai knew very well that when the people simmered down and began to consider events soberly, they would find it most difficult to take the news calmly. By making all this noise the volost administrators hoped to justify a punishment that was as yet unheard of in the steppes.

Kunanbai had never resorted to such measures when he himself had been in power, but with regard to Balagaz and his friends he decided to take a risk. Their actions

had been nothing less than a challenge to the general faith in his unlimited power and authority.

He regarded Balagaz's raids as something more than mere horse stealing. And, in fact, Bazaraly's words and Balagaz's deeds sprang from a common source. This was evident from the fact that Balagaz had not committed haphazard robberies, but had carefully chosen his victims—mainly from among the Irgizbai. His men had not harmed the poor and the sympathy they had gained among the people was consequently growing from day to day.

What would happen if all the hungry, all who were in distress, were to follow them? Kunanbai shuddered at the thought. The dangerous situation demanded ruthless, swift and decisive action, and he hoped to intimidate the people by making an example of the rebels.

But however carefully he tried to cover up his schemes, there were some who began to see through them.

The tribe in general did not approve of Kunanbai's severity and regarded prison and exile as unheard of cruelty. Even Baisal and Suyundik had misgivings. They too had been victimized by the thieves and secretly favoured stringent measures, but had not the courage to approve the steps taken by the volost chief and kept prudently to their auls.

Kunanbai was sensitive to the reaction among the Zhigitek and particularly in the aul of Baidaly.

The Zhigitek were incensed, and Baidaly, too, was enraged when he heard that the captured djiguits had been sent to prison. He was sorry for the men, disapproved the measures of the volost chief and openly declared:

"Never shall we see the day when Kunanbai is ashamed of what he has done or reckons with what the people say! If he had meted out punishment with his own hand or the hands of his kinsmen, there would be none who dared to object. But what will he tell the people now?

He is like a wolf devouring its young. The youth of the Zhigitek will regard him as a hangman!"

Baidaly was not afraid: let Kunanbai know his words. He repeated them wherever he went.

Kunanbai heard him clearly enough. Here was a voice that must be stifled, and he would have to devise even more drastic measures.

"The Zhigitek approve of the theft and shield the thieves! They too will have to answer," he told Takezhan.

Takezhan and Maibasars at once lengthened their list of accused from nine to thirty, including Karasha, Kaumen, Urkimbai and even those whose cattle had recently been restored.

Nor was this all. Bazaraly was also included. When the list was being drawn up, Maibasars said to Takezhan:

"Do you remember how the mail came to be robbed? When the papers were being drawn up, Bazaraly was here and knew everything. He must have ridden at once to his aul and incited Adilkhan to action. I can almost hear the words he flung at us! He pretends to be harmless, but in his heart he is more treacherous than the rest of them!"

Takezhan was quick to remember other slights. Bazaraly was eternally contradicting him, slandering and reviling. He was arrogant and haughty. Were Balagaz to be exiled, Bazaraly would rise up to vindicate him the very next day and try to arouse the people. Takezhan was in full agreement with Maibasars.

"You're right," he said. "That's the man we'll have to put pressure on."

When Baidaly heard that Takezhan was preparing to lodge an accusation against the Zhigitek, he at once summoned Bazaraly, and conferred for a long time with him. Baidaly expressed a thought that had been giving him no rest.

"I'm always having to repent for my carelessness. How many times have I been caught in the fires kindled

by Kunanbai—and yet he catches me napping again and again. Now the same has happened once more. Didn't we dance to his tune all summer? Didn't we call the djiguits of Balagaz thieves and persecute them with Kunanbai? But I've thought things over—I have weighed everything: they were not stealing, but doing something brave and honourable. They were avenging themselves for their humiliations. Have you met a hungry man who could say anything against them? How can I call them thieves—good, brave men who are near to me.... And now Kunanbai has reached out for Kaumen and even Urkimbai! Who is left? Do you imagine he'll spare anyone? Shall we have to take the war path again? He will repeat the brutalities of Takezhan and Maibasars. What has he to say for himself? Let this be a salem of the Zhigitek! Mount your horse and go to him at once. You know how to talk. There's fire enough in you. If he sticks to his guns, don't spare him. Tell him all!"

Bazaraly agreed with Baidaly and at once set off to convey Baidaly's opinion to Kunanbai. But first, he turned towards Musakul instead of Karashoky: neither he nor Baidaly knew for certain which names had been included in Takezhan's indictment. The charges against Kaumen and Urkimbai were mere rumour.

On his way, Bazaraly reflected and decided first to visit Zhidebai.

Abai was at home. He had only recently heard of Takezhan's and Maibasars' excesses.

"They're simply possessed," he said angrily. "They've stirred up the entire people."

He had just sent Yerbol to Musakul to learn exactly against whom the fresh charges had been levelled.

Bazaraly was still talking to Abai when Yerbol returned, gloomy and upset. When Abai asked him for the names, he seemed to be embarrassed by the presence of Bazaraly.

"Tell us what you know," insisted Abai. "And hide nothing!"

"They'll ruin the people, Takezhan and Maibasari!" said Yerbol finally. "They won't rest until they've devoured everyone." And then he named the men included in the new list, among them old men and djiguits that had nothing at all to do with the robberies. Abai was most surprised to hear that Bazaraly had been accused.

"How can it be?" he gasped. "Have they lost their reason? Are they blind?"

This was the first time that Bazaraly had heard of the accusation against him, but he seemed unperturbed and even laughed. Only his sudden pallor indicated his anger. Abai and Yerbol looked at him in surprise.

"I heard Baidaly repenting today and now it's my turn to do so. It seems that I, too, am a sheep that has strayed from the fold. Did I not renounce my brother because I did not want to be considered a thief? But they're not thieves, they're by no means scoundrels, Abai. You've heard of all they have done. Do thieves behave like that? Tell me!" He gave them a questioning glance.

"He is not a thief! You are right! He is not a robber," answered Abai and Yerbol in unison.

"If that is so, then what was I thinking of? Why was I not with them. Why have I not shared their fate?"

Bazaraly said no more.

Yerbol too found something to regret. Since meeting Takezhan earlier that day he had been turning it over in his mind on the way back.

"Ah, Abai! Why didn't you accept the volost when your father asked you to? You would have sided with the people and never let things come to such a pass. Just see what we have to endure now and here you are sitting home too ashamed even to raise your eyes! That's all you've been doing for the people! I can't keep quiet any longer. I can't bear it!" He almost shouted the last words.

"He's right," approved Bazaraly. "If only you would stand up for our rights!"

Abai was silent. He was sorry not because he had refused the volost post, but because, in his efforts to extricate himself from his father's persuasions, he had not objected to the choice of his brother.

Takezhan, his own brother and closest kinsman, was alien to Abai, and there had already been clashes between them. The chasm had widened, and now it was clear that they were destined to enter into open combat. Perhaps the fight had already begun. If he truly felt for Bazaraly and the others, Abai thought, he must intervene at once.

"Bazekeh," he said at last, "would I dare to call myself a man if I did not intercede for you? Takezhan's strength lies not in the steppes but in the town. Then let the town decide our fate! I'll go to Semipalatinsk tomorrow and fight for your interests there to the end."

Bazaraly could thank him only with a grateful look, and he arose happy, as though he had accomplished more than he had hoped for. But now he was in a hurry, refused refreshment and set off for Karashoky.

He arrived at Kunanbai's aul late in the evening. There were no strangers in the house of Nurganim, but Kunanbai would not receive the djiguit.

"Lead him to the guest room and send his food there," he commanded.

Bazaraly sat waiting for a long time. A servant brought him tea. But finally he walked into Kunanbai's room without announcing himself.

Kunanbai was reclining on a pillow, and Nurganim was telling him a story as she rubbed his feet.

Bazaraly's salem was coldly received, but he cared nothing for Kunanbai's mood just then; he seated himself and went straight to the point. His words were resolute and sharp with indignation and certainty as to the justice of his cause. His expression was as frank as his mind.

Nurganim, her eyes fastened upon him, turned red and pale by turn.

Bazaraly began with Takezhan's actions:

"He'll be the death of the old people and the children. Does he think that Kunanbai has grown old and deaf to everything, that he is an old eagle no longer able to fly? How can Takezhan and Maibasars dare, while Kunanbai is yet alive, take measures as yet unheard of in the steppes?"

Kunanbai was not inclined to be talkative.

"Have you seen Takezhan? Have you spoken to him?" he asked.

Bazaraly answered that he had not yet been to see Takezhan, but had learned everything from reliable sources and had come here at once. He enumerated the men whom Takezhan had included in his indictment and then conveyed Baidaly's message: "Takezhan is like a wolf devouring its young."

"The man who goes to prison or exile goes to death," he added. "Takezhan may rest assured that he will get rid of his kinsmen in this way. But let him furnish them with shrouds for the way and dig the graves here for the starving children left behind. Does he not understand that such brutality will not be forgiven?"

Kunanbai understood what Bazaraly was driving at, and found that it was not at all to his liking.

"If you've come here to demonstrate your strength, let me remind you that strength is proved by actions and not by words. Your anger is directed against Takezhan. Go then and match your strength against his," he advised.

There was hardly anything more to say and Bazaraly concluded with a direct challenge:

"Very well then: let Takezhan spare no one. Whether he intends evil or wreaks evil amounts to one and the same thing. But remember that ruthless hatred and ruthless revenge are also the same. This will start a fresh enmity which will be talked about from generation to

generation—and due to no fault of the Zhigitek. It is clear to all on whom the curses will fall. That is all that I can say for myself and for the Zhigitek at large.”

Kunanbai heard him to the end.

“Very well! You have spoken! But enough! It’s time to stop.”

Bazaraly arose and left the room. Kunanbai, no longer listening to Nurganim’s story, withdrew his feet, which she had been stroking. Suddenly aged, his single eye lost in a frown, he appeared to his young wife the embodiment of icy winter. He was wrapped up in his own thoughts and seemed to her more distant than a stranger.

And so he had permitted Bazaraly to take liberties he would have tolerated from no one.... Not only had the man dealt him a telling blow, but had emerged unscathed. And Kunanbai had not been able to answer. If one thought it over, Takezhan really had gone too far. It was all very well to harry some djiguit or other, but it was quite another thing to raise one’s hand against Bazaraly! Couldn’t his son realize that? It was true that Kunanbai hated the Zhigitek just as much as Takezhan did, but he had not told his son to strike at such as Bazaraly. His first impulse was to spare Bazaraly, but he quickly took himself in hand. Bazaraly was a Zhigitek, who with his entire clan had sought revenge and brought harm—and that was enough.

Bazaraly supped alone in the guest room, and went to bed. The anger that had raged within him during the past two or three days seemed to have spent itself in his last words to Kunanbai. He had been troubled with sleeplessness of late, but now he fell fast asleep as soon as his head touched the pillows.

Suddenly, he found himself wide awake in the dark. Someone had touched him.

“Who’s that?” he gasped.

“Don’t be afraid,” said a gentle voice.

He recognized Nurganim.

"What are you doing here, you mad woman?" whispered Bazaraly raising his head.

"Be quiet," she answered calmly. "My heart has long been with you. . . . It was the Mirza himself who gave it to you. . . ."

Kissing him firmly, she sank into his arms. The djiguit spoke not another word.

When Nurganim wanted to rise and go, Bazaraly felt that he could not let her.

"My darling, you have raised a storm in my heart. Why go away so soon?" And he embraced her again.

But Nurganim disengaged herself gently.

"May fate be kind to you wherever you are! I am yours, heart and soul, and wish you well, Bazekeh."

She knelt to kiss him again, then quickly arose and was gone.

It seemed that she had been there but an instant, an instant which had upset the whole of Bazaraly's world. And Nurganim too carried away a joy which she could hardly contain—the joy of first love.

In Nurganim's presence Kunanbai had admired Bazaraly's looks and intelligence and had that very day declared that such a djiguit should be spared even if he were an enemy. If only the wily and cautious Kunanbai could have known what an effect his words were to produce!

5

Abai and Yerbol had been in town for a considerable time.

Kunanbai's sons usually stayed with Tinibai when they were in the town, but Takezhan had come to Semipalatinsk earlier and was already living there. Abai and Yerbol therefore rented an apartment from a childless merchant of their acquaintance.

It was not customary to ride a horse in town, and Abai, having grown used to city life as a boy, quickly adapted himself to the new conditions. The well-fed grey which had carried Yerbol to town from the aul was now drawing the friends swiftly through the streets in a sleigh. It was a clear day, but bitterly cold. The snow in the streets lay hard-packed, crunching under the runners. They were on their way to visit the well-known Semipalatinsk lawyer Andreyev, whom the Kazakhs called Akbas Andreyevich.*

Abai had plunged headlong into work on behalf of Balagaz from the first. The town was full of newly-arrived Tobikty, especially from the Zhigitek and Irgizbai. Takezhan had also come with his entire suite, intoxicated with power and the right to prosecute the guilty. He showered the judges, the district chief and the governor-general with papers, bent on proving the guilt of the thirty djiguits he had indicted.

The Zhigitek had up till that time been legally represented by Bozhei's son, but neither he nor his advisers knew anything of legal procedure or the subtleties of a paper battle. They had been in town for a long time, but had accomplished nothing. It was Abai who set matters aright.

At first he had lodged a counter-complaint on behalf of the families of Balagaz, Adilkhan and others now in custody. Wherever the papers of the volost chief appeared, they were sure to be followed by the complaints of the Zhigitek.

Takezhan's knowledge of legal procedure was poor, but Abai knew that he was being supported by Tinibai, before whom all doors opened freely. He therefore sent a man to convey his salem to Tinibai.

"Takezhan is Kunanbai's son, but I, too, have sprung from that nest," stated Abai's message. "The volost chief

* Akbas—white-haired.—*Ed.*

has this time involved himself in a matter which can only disgrace his father and himself. Tinibai has always been a good friend. May he, therefore, not lend his support to Takezhan, who is now contending for a false cause. If Tinibai truly wishes Takezhan well, then let him dissuade him from his dishonourable actions."

The effect of this was to weaken his opponent. Tinibai visited Abai in person and after a long talk with him adopted a perceptibly cooler attitude towards Takezhan.

Abai was now about to take a second highly important step. He was on his way to ask the most prominent lawyer in the region to assume the legal defence of Balagaz and his djiguits, to collect all the complaints, put them in order and dispatch them to the proper authorities.

The sleigh drew up before a one-storey house on the bank of the Irtysh River. Abai and Yerbol entered the courtyard.

This was the first time they had ever called upon the white-haired lawyer. Akbas Andreyevich's face was not old, but his hair was actually white and his beard quite grey. He was a tall man, firmly built, impressive-looking and with a large handsome face. His sharp eyes, peering at them earnestly through his spectacles, gave him a meditative, engrossed air.

In the lawyer's room a black-moustached, snub-nosed interpreter was waiting for Abai. The only asset of this hare-brained ignoramus who was employed as interpreter by the regional court was his ability to chatter in Russian.

The first thing that met Abai's eyes as he shook hands with the lawyer was the interminable shelves of books. Neat rows of austere volumes covered all four walls of the large room. During his long talk with the lawyer he could not take his eyes from them. Never in his life had he seen so many books in one house—and all in the possession of one man!

Abai laid his papers on the table. Both he and Yerbol tried to defend the Zhigitek, and particularly Bazaraly, Kaumen, Urkimbai and their nearest kin.

The interpreter translated the substance of the complaint, and the lawyer asked for the names of those who had lodged it. At the mention of Kunanbai's name Andreyev looked up in surprise and began rapidly to leaf through the sheaf of papers on the table. Convinced that one of his clients bore the same name as the volost chief, he questioned the interpreter and was amazed to learn that Abai and the volost ruler were blood brothers.

"Your brother has indicted these men and demands that they be prosecuted—and you have come to vindicate them? What does this mean?" he asked.

The interpreter conveyed the words to Abai.

"Yes, the volost chief and I are brothers," said Abai, "and it is just because I am a near kinsman of his that I can see the dark side of this affair better than others. I cannot keep silent in the face of injustice and violence. I am neither an administrator nor a hired solicitor. I am not a relative of the defendant Kaumen; nor is my friend Yerbol. We have come as disinterested witnesses. Our complaint has been framed accordingly. If the administration and the court wish to know the truth, then let them question such as us. We would like you to set all this down in our papers."

The lawyer regarded Abai with interest. This young man who had sprung from a wild tribe, a nomad, was speaking of duty, of humanity—and his words carried conviction.

Andreyev was a man of great erudition and enormous experience, but had only recently come among the Kazakhs and did not yet know this people. In his youth he had lived in St. Petersburg, where he had been connected with men who had fought the tyranny of the tsarist authorities. Compelled to flee from the capital in consequence, he had been able to live and work in the provinces

undisturbed. For a long time he had practised law in the towns of the Volga and later in the Urals. The past few years he had spent in Siberia. A highly-educated man, an earnest adherent of enlightenment, he had begun to collect material on the life and customs of the Kirghiz people.* His influence in the town was considerable, although he held no official post of importance.

While replying to Andreyev's questions, Abai continued to glance at the bookshelves.

"Yes, there it is!" he burst out at last. "The greatest treasure in the world. And how beautifully they are clothed here, those magnificent ideas!"

The interpreter conveyed his words to the lawyer.

Abai's eyes strayed to several neatly bound volumes on the nearest shelf.

"Are those the books of law? What do they say?" he asked curiously.

The volumes were Pushkin's works, and their white-haired owner began to explain:

"No, those are not the laws. Those books were written by a poet. . . ." He hopelessly waved his hand. "You'll never understand! It's difficult to explain!"

He had the idea that the Kirghiz people had no poets and would not even know the meaning of the word.

But Abai continued to question him through the interpreter. The latter translated the lawyer's sentences conscientiously enough, but on reaching the word "poet," did not trouble to search for a suitable Kazakh word and merely said:

"Akyn. . . The books of an akyn. . ."

"What's that you've said? Which akyn?" Abai had not clearly understood.

* Before Soviet times, both of these large peoples—the Kirghiz and the Kazakhs—were often lumped together even by progressive Russians.—*Ed.*

The interpreter would have been glad to be done with his idle questions.

"What do you know of such things? You would not understand," he said.

Touched to the quick, Abai ironically remarked:

"That's strange. He is a man and can think. I too am a man and can think. But we cannot understand each other. Our thoughts are lost in words as in a thicket and we stand facing each other not like men, but like animals. He fights shy of me as a peasant's horse of a camel in the steppes."

Yerbol threw back his head and laughed. Andreyev asked why the man was laughing, and Abai looked ominously at the interpreter.

"Tell him what I said, word for word."

The lawyer listened carefully and laughed too.

"He's right! Quite right! A horse shies at a camel and a camel moves away from a horse. We're really very much like them." And he laughed again. "But we're not the only ones like that. Here stand the statute-books, and there"—he gestured towards the window—"lie the Kirghiz steppes with their own customs and laws. They keep looking at each other and understand nothing. You have put it well!"

This was the first of frequent meetings between Abai and Andreyev.

But anxiety in the auls was growing. Several of those indicted by Takezhan had already been taken into custody, and there were rumours that Bazaraly and Karasha were in hiding.

Things had come to such a pass that Baidaly, too, found it necessary to come to town. Having made the rounds of all the administrative offices, he at last came upon Abai.

"Abai! Light of my eyes! Even our horses are frightened in the streets of this town," he complained. "It's too crowded here. And when you go into a house, your feet

slip from under you. If you try to talk to an official, you find yourself bleating and threshing your arms about like a deaf-mute. I can't get anything done. For us of the steppes the town is roadless and we slip like an old camel on ice."

All laughed. And yet there was a note of bitterness in Baidaly's humorous words. From that day, Abai accompanied Baidaly and his party to all the offices.

Having established friendly relations with Akbas Andreyevich, he discussed further measures with the lawyer.

Takezhan was still seizing people, but since the day that Andreyev had interceded, matters had obviously taken a turn favourable to the Zhigitek. Abai furnished the defence with fresh material which completely altered the aspect of the case.

On speaking to the lawyer, he showed that the forays of Balagaz and his djiguits were neither theft nor robbery. He gave many instances illustrating the hopeless position of the hungry. The people had been left landless, were then stricken by the djut, and finally deprived of their cattle. He explained why the djut, so ruinous to the people, had spared a handful of the lucky ones. The djiguits had taken horses only from the rich and had shared their booty with the hungry. As he listened, Andreyev recollected Robin Hood, Karl Moor and Dubrovsky. He would not let Abai go and questioned him until late at night.

After this, the conditions of Abilgazy and his comrades in prison took a sharp turn for the better. The lawyer skilfully supported the petitions of the wives and children in behalf of their husbands and fathers, and within a few days Kaumen, Urkimbai, Bazaraly and others were set free. Messengers galloped off to the Zhigitek with the happy news.

Takezhan at once sent Abai an angry salem: "Let Abai keep out of this! Why does he seek to harm me?"

Abai's reply was prompt:

"We may be considered brothers in the eyes of our father and mother. But we are strangers when it is a matter of life and death and the suffering he has caused the people. Let him not demand an account from me."

Takezhan hastened to send a messenger to Kunanbai with an account of Abai's words and actions. The father accordingly sent his salem to Abai: "Let Abai return at once. Did he not refuse to be the ruler of the volost? Then let him not put obstacles in his brother's way!"

But his salem arrived when Abai had already done all that was necessary, and now nothing could alter the course of events.

And yet the district administrators were not to be moved by all the arguments of the defence and freed only those who had not been directly involved in the robberies. The fate of Balagaz and Adilkhan continued to rest in their tenacious grip. The more frequently the administrators heard that need and hunger had caused the crimes, the more severe did they grow. The spectre of the current peasant uprisings in Russia preyed upon the Governor's mind and he was ready to adopt the sharpest measures against the instigators of the "rebellion."

The authorities shrank from decisive action, however. The events had occurred in the remote steppes, which were unfamiliar to them. They were deterred, moreover, by the enormous number of petitioners, and deemed it necessary to tread cautiously if they were not to stir up fresh unrest in the steppes. Nevertheless ten of those indicted by Takezhan had to stand trial.

At first there was talk of fearful punishments: Balagaz, Adilkhan and their djiguits might be sentenced to hard labour for life. But after Abai and the lawyer had availed themselves of all possible means, the sentence was commuted to exile near Irkutsk.

Their kinsmen in the town tearfully took leave of the condemned men, but did not lose hope that they would return.

"Wait, you'll come home to your own auls!" they soothed the exiles, trying to hearten them and strengthen their confidence.

It was time for Abai to think of going home, and the young man went to say good-bye to Andreyev.

"You are deeply concerned for the people," remarked the lawyer. "That's a splendid merit in one so young. But if you're really intent on helping the people and yourself, you should strive for enlightenment. You should study."

Andreyev had divined Abai's fondest hope.

"I've been wanting to study," said Abai sadly, "but where? I can't go to school—at my age. Tell me, can one study without going to school?"

The lawyer hastened to reassure Abai: one's age had nothing to do with studying. There were people who had taken up studies when they were forty; though self-taught, they had become renowned savants. He mentioned their names and explained how one could study without going to school. And the lawyer promised to find a teacher for Abai. It was only necessary for the young man to make up his mind firmly, to get down to the books and work hard, he told Abai. If Abai were ready to do this, the doors of knowledge would be open to him.

Abai's joy knew no bounds. It seemed to him that the bonds which had held him so tightly were at last to be loosened. He returned to his aul to receive the blessing of his family, to gather the necessary means and to set off again as soon as possible. He was full of youthful enthusiasm.

In Zhidebai he was not long detained. Dilda and his mother were quick to agree and the opinions of the others did not matter. Mirzakhon was sent to Semipalatinsk with a horse which was to be butchered for good in the

town. The next problem was that of money. This was solved by sending a bale of skins and several head of cattle to town. Abai then himself prepared for the journey.

Dilda had been delivered of a third child that summer. Tiny Abdrakhman, already able to laugh, was the first child to stir Abai's paternal feelings.

Dilda's children took after their mother, and did not resemble Abai in the least. Their little faces were not dark, but pale. Abdrakhman too was a pale little wisp of a fellow, but the dainty oval of his features, the wonderfully large eyes and arched eyebrows were different, were his alone, and dear to Abai.

Abai took leave of Dilda when they were alone. There was little to say. Each had a friendly feeling for the other. Dilda, restrained and sparing of words as always, expressed but a single wish:

"Your mother and the little children are left at home. Don't forget them. I ask nothing for myself. But don't let us wait too long. Come home when you can!" She smiled at him.

Dilda was not one to express her feelings with tears or sighs, and had always been reserved. But when there was something on her mind, she invariably spoke up frankly, without subterfuge. Abai looked at her warmly and caressed her shoulder.

"I'm not going off to enjoy myself, but to become a worthier man. Just remember that."

He dressed little Abdrakhman, took the child in his arms and as he went to visit his mother he took along the child.

Ulzhan had visibly aged in the past years. She stood looking at her son with unwavering eyes for a moment and took the infant from him. Then the old mother pressed her face to the child's head for an instant and handed him on to Dilda. With a light sigh, she drew Abai to herself and kissed him. All the emotion singing in her heart was expressed in her pallid face.

"Light of my eyes! Your departed grandmother once called you 'her only one.' All the others were one to her, but you were quite special. Do you remember how she prayed to God when you were ill: 'Oh Allah, preserve this light of my soul from the cruel and the heartless. . . .' She departed from us with those words on her lips."

Abai remembered Zereh's last words; his mother had somewhat changed them.

"Your time has come," continued Ulzhan pensively, "and your field of battle lies before you. Be brave! Just how you are to gain the victory is something you can see better than we. It is not for us to be shackles on your feet. God grant you happiness!"

As he had done as a little boy, Abai embraced his mother and fondly took leave of her. The entire aul had come out to see him on his way, and when Abai had mounted and said his good-byes to everyone his mother called to him again.

"Abai-zhan, you should stop at the aul of Toiguly! Your father and his friends have gone there to celebrate a betrothal. He asked us to follow him with the whole of the aul, but it is too difficult for me. If you don't go there either, he'll be hurt. Stay with them a while before you go on," she begged.

Abai promised to do as she asked, waved his hand and spurred his horse.

Toiguly's aul lay somewhat out of his way, on the slopes of Orda Mountain; but was nearer to Semipalatinsk than Zhidebai.

Toiguly was a prominent bai of the Mamai people, and Kunanbai had this winter decided to form an alliance with him through marriage. The winter had been a good one and the cattle well fed. Toiguly had therefore been able to fix a date for Kunanbai's visit. The latter had now arrived with a crowd of his kinsmen to celebrate the betrothal.

Abai and Yerbol too arrived. Kunanbai was accompanied by Karatai, Zhumabai, Zhakip and other old men. All the three houses of Toiguly were filled with guests, and everywhere there was noise and laughter. Abai and Yerbol entered one of the houses and sat down, listening to the general conversation. As always, Karatai had the most to say.

Discussing various matters, the old men compared the old days with the present. Karatai spoke of his youth, of his father and grandfathers and, finally, came to the present; the people had grown puny just like cattle in the djut and poor in virtue.

To this Abai smilingly objected:

"Those were good old times when neighbouring clans were constantly raiding and pillaging one another! Then the old people, the women and the children could not sleep or even eat in peace. And the lone traveller was in constant danger on his way from the Sibai to the Tobikty or from the Tobikty to Semipalatinsk. He constantly had to keep watch, for fear of being robbed or killed! Yes, those were grand times!"

But the old men would not listen. The past seemed so delightful to them; they spoke of the untrammelled life and abundance of bygone days.

"And the people were taller then, and more impressive," they said.

Kunanbai fully agreed with this and clinched their arguments with a weighty observation:

"Every new generation is nearer to the end of the world than the last, and humanity is withering away. Our times, on the other hand, were nearer to the days of the Prophet than these. And the nearer to the Prophet, the better the people!"

But Abai responded at once. He was curiously elated, like an akyn about to engage in a contest of verse and song. The powers within him craved for open combat.

"Goodness and happiness are measured neither by time nor space," he objected. "The pinnacle of Ala-Tau is nearer the sun, yet it is covered with eternal ice, while its foothills are wreathed in verdure and flowers and abound in fruit and are blessed by all that live. But Abu Talib, the father of the Prophet, was even closer to him than you and yet died a gyaur."*

There was general laughter. The old men felt the force of the blow and silently regarded Kunanbai, who wrathfully shouted at Abai:

"That's enough!"

Abai raised his hands in surprise, but said nothing more.

The laughter ceased instantly and silence hung heavily over the room.

But Karatai was secretly delighted and, nudging Zhakip, whispered to him:

"Just see, he won't let us have our way; he's got us in a stranglehold!"

Soon the refreshments were served. Abai and Yerbol arose to put on their cloaks in order to set off again. Kunanbai followed them as they left the house.

Calling to Abai, he led him aside to a rocky hillock. It had been a long time since the two had been alone together.

Kunanbai regarded his son coldly.

"You were sent to study, to acquire knowledge, and were brought up by a tutor, whereas we grew up in ignorance. But why has your knowledge failed to teach you to respect your father in the presence of others? What merit is there in tripping up your father and worsting him in front of strangers?" he asked reproachfully.

So his father admitted that he had been worsted.

Abai regarded him intently; the stony, commanding features seemed to have withered and shrunk. He was

* Gyaur—an unbeliever.—Ed.

bent and shrivelled, and in his reproaches, too, there was something childishly petulant, almost helpless. But it was the duty of young people to respect their elders, and of a son to respect his father.

"You speak justly. I am to blame, of course. Please forgive me!" he replied, to end the conversation, but his father had not yet finished.

"I have been meaning to talk to you for some time," he said after a moment's reflection. "I can see three failings in you. Listen to what I have to say."

"Speak, Father." Abai looked at Kunanbai wonderingly.

"Firstly, you are unable to distinguish the grain from the chaff. You do not value what you have and squander your treasures senselessly. You are too open and accessible—like a lake with flat shores, whose waters are lapped by dogs and muddied by the hoofs of cattle. Secondly, you are unable to distinguish between friends and foes and to treat foes as foes and friends as friends. You conceal nothing within yourself. A man leading the people cannot afford to act in such a way. He will not be able to keep them in hand. Thirdly, you are beginning to lean towards the Russians. Your soul is fleeing to them and you do not care that every Moslem will come to regard you as a stranger," spoke Kunanbai.

Abai at once understood where his father was aiming—at his dearest hopes. Having chosen his own path, Abai looked for support in the very things that his father now condemned.

Kunanbai had indeed correctly estimated the qualities of his son. Abai would bend his will to no one and nothing. Again he was strangely agitated, as he had been in the house. He could not keep quiet—not even out of pity for his father:

"I cannot accept a single one of your reproaches, Father. I am convinced that I am right. You say that I am a lake with flat shores. Would it be better to be like the waters of a deep well, accessible only to him who

has a rope, a pail and strong arms? I prefer to be accessible to the old men and the children, to all whose arms are weak. Secondly, you have spoken of keeping the people in hand and of the sort of man needed for such a task. In my opinion the people were once like a flock of sheep: if the shepherd shouted, 'Ait!' they would all jump up, and if 'Shait!' they would all lie down. Then the people came to be like a drove of camels: if you threw a stone before them and shouted, 'Shok!' they would first look round, think—and only then turn from their path. But now the people, who have thrown off their former meekness and boldly opened their eyes, are like a drove of horses obeying only riders who share all their hardships—the frosts and the blizzards—who can forget their own homes for the sake of the drove, who can use a lump of ice as a pillow and a drift of snow as a bed. Thirdly, you spoke of the Russians. The most precious things for the people and for me are knowledge and light. These things are in the hands of the Russians, and if they will give me the treasures I have sought all my life how can they be alien to me? Were I to reject this, I would remain ignorant and I cannot see anything honourable in that."

Kunanbai, who had been listening attentively, heaved a sigh. An unusual sense of frustration darkened his features, but he spoke no more.

Abai took leave of him and set off.

Kunanbai remained on the hill alone, pensive and despondent. And so he had been defeated again—and not by his son alone, but by life, swift and all-conquering. "Your strength is exhausted, your time is gone and you must go," it had coldly told him in the voice of his own son; and its relentless currents were sweeping him aside.

Abai was riding through the same plains over which he had come when returning from the madrasah as a boy, so homesick for his family and his native aul. The steppes that were green then now lay covered with snow as

far as the eye could see. The mounds and the hills loomed white on all sides and seemed to be listlessly brooding over faint visions of the past. There was a time when the sight of these steppes had filled his boyish heart with joy, when he had sought happiness here in its vast spaces, in his native aul. But now he was leaving them for the town, hopeful of finding that which he had sought even then. . . .

He was now twenty-five. A long vista of days receded into the past in an endless chain. He could plainly see how the trail of his life had led him now into the thickets and now over the mountain passes. And once again it was leading him upwards over a winding course—that tortuous path of his life.

Yes, he had emerged on the heights.

The seedling which had once struggled to break through the stony ground had eventually sprouted a slender shoot—a lone living thing on the rugged cliff. The sapling had struck deep roots and had risen to be a strong, upstanding tree that feared neither winter frosts, nor the wild blizzards of the mountains.

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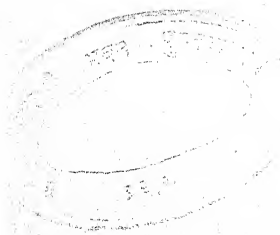
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